

**The Lingering Legacy of Being Neglected in  
Childhood: A Hermeneutic  
Phenomenological Study of Adults' Lived  
Experiences of Neglect as Children**

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## Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Psychotherapy (DPsych), is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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## Abstract

Honor Carroll

Title: The Lingering Legacy of Being Neglected in Childhood: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of Adults' Lived Experiences of Neglect as Children

This study sought to uncover the experience of neglect through interviews with fifteen adults who were neglected as children. While neglect is the most prevalent form of reported child maltreatment in the world, there is a dearth of research and practice surrounding this concerning phenomenon from psychotherapy and related disciplines, and the voices of those who have experienced neglect have been underreported. Using hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, this study privileges the voices of those who were neglected in childhood, uncovering five common lived experiences from analysis of the interviews, namely, *Being Unloved*, *Being Inferior*, *Seesawing*, *Soldiering* and *Yearning to Escape*. Beyond these five experiences, this study reveals *The Lingering Legacy of Neglect* throughout the lifespan, unveiling the experience of neglect as a lifelong journey. In privileging the experience of each of the fifteen adult participants, this study contributes novel insights to the empirical literature and brings a unique understanding of the experience of childhood neglect to the practice and research of psychotherapy.

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Pause, you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day.

(From 'Great Expectations', Charles Dickens, 1881, p.94)

### **The Call to Adventure: What led me to this Research?**

Before beginning this journey through neglect, I must acknowledge what has brought me to this place. Over the past ten years, I have worked as a psychotherapist with children and young people who have experienced maltreatment and I have made referrals to social work departments on several occasions regarding cases of possible neglect. One day, during a meeting with a social worker, I shared concerns regarding a child's presentation and issues at home. After I spoke, the social worker bowed her head and said that I should keep calling in my concerns but, for now, she couldn't see much being done with the content of the referral. Her honesty and disappointment were palpable. As she left the meeting, she turned to me and said, "call me if something happens". That was the moment I began this journey. I sought out psychotherapy research and practice literature on neglect and I found it difficult to gain clarity regarding the most suitable psychotherapy approaches or interventions and, even further, I found it difficult to uncover what neglect was exactly. This prompted me to set out on this expedition, to discover what the experience is really like for those who have gone through it. I decided it best to speak with adults who were neglected as children, in the hope that they would provide rich insights and narratives to support my learning and contribute to

the understanding of psychotherapists working with clients for whom nothing is happening, the clients who are experiencing neglect.

### **Our Starting Point: Why Research Lived Experiences of Neglect?**

Neglect is the most prevalent form of reported child maltreatment (Finkelhor et al., 2014c; O'Hara, et al., 2015; Radford et al., 2017; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). It persists across high income countries and, in 2017, it accounted for 41% of admissions into the Irish care system (Tusla, 2017). The reporting of child cruelty and neglect has tripled in Northern Ireland in recent years (Moriarty, 2017), neglect currently accounts for half of children subject to child protection plans in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2020) and it is the dominant form of maltreatment in child protection investigations in the United States irrespective of the age of child or ethnicity (Kim et al., 2017).

Despite the staggering statistics, there is a considerable dearth of research literature on childhood neglect (Logan-Greene & Semanchin Jones, 2017). While there is much insightful research into child maltreatment, there is limited research concerning childhood neglect specifically and confusion persists regarding the most appropriate psychotherapeutic interventions, the best avenues for policy development, ethical means of conducting future research, and even clarification on a clear definition to explain, what exactly is childhood neglect? Furthermore, the voices of adults or children who have experienced neglect are difficult to find in the empirical literature, leaving psychotherapists working with neglected children or the adults they become in a place of uncertainty regarding what the experience of neglect is really like.



## **The Destination: Aims & Objectives of the Study**

This study sought to contribute to psychotherapists' understanding of neglect by uncovering the experience of neglect from fifteen adults who experienced neglect as children. The focus on adults was considered the best avenue for illuminating the experience of childhood neglect as they would provide a unique voice which has, as of yet, been underreported in the literature. The overall aim was to gain a greater understanding of adults' experiences of neglect in childhood and the legacy of this neglect in adulthood. The objectives within this aim were:

- To contribute to the understanding of the experience of neglect in childhood and its legacy into adulthood
- To enable psychotherapists and other professionals to recognise the place of neglect within the broader issue of child maltreatment
- To give voice to the participants, allowing their experiences to be officially recorded and acknowledged within the empirical literature

## **Method of Travel: The Chosen Methodology**

In pursuit of these aims and objectives, hermeneutic phenomenology was deemed the most suitable and effective methodology for this study. This approach to research privileges the lived experience of the participants and seeks to make meaning of a phenomenon. Van Manen's contemporary approach (2016), in particular, offers a rich depth of understanding and his application of the methodology, in its iterative and immersive process, was considered the best fit for this study on adults' experiences of childhood neglect.

## Mapping out the Route: An Outline of the Chapters

The thesis is comprised of five distinct chapters. The following is an overview of the four chapters which are to follow:

Chapter 2 is a literature review of the empirical, theoretical and practice literature on childhood neglect. Alongside neglect, the literature review includes literature on child maltreatment, developmental trauma, and adverse childhood experiences, as well as additional practice literature from psychotherapy and related disciplines. The review highlights that, while there is much quantitative literature on the effects, contributory and protective factors of child maltreatment, there is a need for greater focus on neglect, and qualitative studies which include the voices of those who have experienced neglect need to be given particular consideration as, to date, there have been no empirical studies which privilege the voice of the adult who was neglected in childhood.

Chapter 3 presents the chosen methodology for this study, hermeneutic phenomenology. It presents this methodology as, firstly, a qualitative approach, then a phenomenological approach, and finally, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, with emphasis on the phenomenological style of Max Van Manen. The chapter then provides a detailed account of the application of this methodology, describing the inclusion criteria, recruitment process, data gathering methods, analysis process and writing. It concludes with ethical considerations, research rigour and a nod to the reflexive process.

Chapter 4 presents the findings. The voices of the participants are privileged in the findings through evocative, direct quotes, with each participant's story given a place in the phenomenon which best fits their lived experience of neglect. The experiences of childhood neglect which were uncovered in the analysis are presented in this chapter as *Being Unloved*, *Being Inferior*, *Seesawing*, *Soldiering*, and *Yearning to Escape*. Each experience is then uncovered as it persists into adulthood as *The Lingering Legacy of Neglect*. The chapter

concludes by illuminating the experiences of neglect as phenomena within the one process of *Journeying Through Neglect*.

Chapter 5 is the discussion chapter. Following the framework of a journey presented in Chapter 4, this chapter takes its own journey through neglect. Beginning on a familiar path by placing the findings within the empirical base, the discussion chapter then veers off to explore some of the novel outcomes of this study in greater detail, particularly, the emotional experience of neglect, the original concept of seesawing, and the common lived experience of the participants in returning to the frontline of trauma and neglect in adulthood as professionals. From the insights garnered in the analysis and presented in the findings and discussion, this study humbly offers a descriptive summary of neglect tailored to psychotherapists, which seeks to privilege the experience of neglect as unearthed in this study. Using this definition, recommendations are offered to psychotherapy practice, supervision and research, before the journey of this study on adults' experiences of neglect in childhood comes to an end with a study evaluation, researcher reflections and concluding remarks from the end of the journey.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

As a child I felt myself to be alone, and I am still, because I know things and must hint at things which others apparently know nothing of, and for the most part do not want to know.

(Carl Jung, 1995, p.389)

### Introduction

Child neglect was first formally recognised in the early 1960s by Dr Henry Kempe and his colleagues in the widely publicised article, “The Battered Child Syndrome” (Kempe et al., 1962, p.17). Dr Kempe primarily sought to draw physicians’ attention to the physical abuse of young children and, in doing so, strongly highlighted the role of parental neglect alongside and within cases of physical trauma. However, over time, increased reporting of other forms of child maltreatment overshadowed the focus on child neglect, with many claiming this was due to the more dramatic, sporadic nature of physical or sexual abuse, and the often visible evidence of these forms of maltreatment (Gershater-Molko et al., 2002). Subsequently, research literature on childhood neglect and the outcomes that persist into adulthood has declined with Stoltenborgh et al. condemning “the deplorable dearth of studies on child neglect” (2013, p.345). As it stands today, child neglect continues to be studied within the wider scope of child maltreatment, included in studies regarding physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Daniel et al., 2010; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016). However, there are unique experiences, contributory factors and behaviours of neglect that are being overlooked (Mulder et al., 2018). Ever-changing definitions of neglect (DePanfilis, 2006; Friedman & Billick, 2014), the complexity of outcomes that arise from childhood neglect

(Pearce & Pezzot Pearce, 2013), and many barriers to researching childhood neglect, such as real world application difficulties and research hierarchy (Allen et al., 2012; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016), have been cited as reasons for the absence of a specific focus on neglect in the literature.

This review attempts to provide such a focus on the current empirical, theoretical and practice literature on childhood neglect. It will begin with an emphasis on the areas of research which have taken precedence in the literature, namely, the definition of child neglect, the signs and contributing factors to child neglect, and the effects of neglect in childhood and adulthood. It will then present theoretical frameworks that have been applied to the phenomenon and review contemporary approaches to intervening in cases of neglect. It will also acknowledge throughout the barriers that have impeded further research into childhood neglect. Finally, it will explore neglect as a lived experience, a consideration that has rarely been prioritised in the research and, thus, present a rationale for this study and its place in the literature on childhood neglect.

### **Search Strategy**

A comprehensive search of several databases was conducted (Academic Search Complete; JSTOR; PsycINFO; PsycARTICLES; PubMed; Web of Science) using a 30-year time frame (1990-2020). This expansive time frame was catered for due to the limited research and literature published on child neglect. The key words used in the initial search of the databases were *child, neglect, maltreatment* and *psychotherapy*. *Psychology* and *intervention* were later added to the search terms to identify literature linked to psychotherapy. A perusal of bibliographies of key articles resulted in the inclusion of additional studies, and key policy, practice and theoretical literature on child maltreatment was also included for review. All sources were read in full and material was collated on the

basis of pre-defined foci: definitions, signs and contributory factors, effects, theories, interventions, and experience.

### **Defining Neglect**

Defining childhood neglect is a complex task for researchers, policy makers, social workers and mental health practitioners, including psychotherapists (Depanfilis, 2006). This is due to a variety of factors. Firstly, inconsistent definitions of neglect persist across countries, as what may be considered neglect in one country may not be deemed so in another (McTavish et al., 2017). This can be attributed to, among other issues, poverty levels, cultural norms, historical differences, and levels of educational disadvantage (Friedman & Billick, 2015; Nadan et al., 2015). In considering historical definitions of neglect, in the United States “neglected” or “dependent” children were once housed in reform schools or refuges due to poverty or abandonment and were often treated as young offenders (Thomas Jr., 1972, p.315). In 1882, a Massachusetts statute defined the neglected child as:

Any child under fourteen years of age, by reason of orphanage, or of the neglect, crime, drunkenness or other vice of his parents, is growing up without education or salutary control, and in circumstances exposing him to lead an idle and dissolute life (Thomas Jr., 1972, p. 317).

While these perspectives on neglect are of a bygone era, they highlight the relationship between childhood neglect and poverty and, although omitting psychological and emotional issues, they share some similarities with the definitions we use today concerning physical neglect, supervision, and education. In tandem with discrepancies in defining neglect historically, definitions of neglect developed for government agencies remain inconsistent (Taillieu et al., 2016) and public understanding of what constitutes neglect is limited (Williams, 2017) and culturally dependent. Culturally, Friedman and Billick (2015) give the example, “some Hispanic parents sometimes do not use car seats for their children because

they think the child will feel abandoned if they are not in their arms” (p.254). The cultural, social, global and historical inconsistencies coincide with the lack of consensus regarding definitions of neglect in research studies (Gershater-Molko et al., 2002), which arose due to complex barriers to researching neglect (Stoltenborgh et al., 2013), such as real world application difficulties (Daniel, 2016; Swenson et al., 2010; Weisz & Kazdin, 2010) and a hierarchy of research types (Chaffin & Friedrich, 2004; Urwin, 2007).

Another issue in clearly defining neglect concerns the regular placement of neglect as a subcategory within a larger phenomenon. These phenomena include child maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016), adverse childhood experiences (Asmundson & Afifi, 2019) and developmental trauma (van der Kolk, 2005). In research, the data on neglect can be limited within more generalised maltreatment studies and, thus, discrepancies between neglect and other maltreatment types can get lost (Stith et al., 2009; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016). In short, a lack of consensus regarding a definition for childhood neglect persists across the many areas mentioned above. Differing global, historical, social, cultural and empirical understandings of neglect feed into one another, resulting in a sense of confusion in our understanding of what really constitutes childhood neglect, leaving concerning implications for further research, legal proceedings and, above all, child welfare (DePanfilis, 2006; Hornor, 2014).

In Ireland, neglect has been defined as “an omission, where the child suffers significant harm or impairment of development by being deprived of food, clothing, warmth, hygiene, intellectual stimulation, supervision and safety, attachment to and affection from adults and/or medical care” (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011, p.8). While aspects of this definition differ from definitions across other countries and research studies, the acknowledgement of neglect as an omission, rather than a commission, is regarded as a key signifier in distinguishing child neglect from other forms of child abuse (Maguire-Jack &

Showalter, 2016). Omission, described as a “failure to provide” (O’Hara et al., 2015, p. 1), encompasses different behaviours to commission, which is more appropriate in referring to acts of child abuse, such as physical, sexual or emotional abuse (Glaser, 2011; Hornor, 2014). The definition for child neglect outlined above, used by the Irish government and the child welfare service Tusla following its inclusion in the Children First Guidelines (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011), has been chosen for use in this study. While this is not a perfect definition for uncovering the lived experience of neglect, it is deemed good enough due to the prioritisation of neglect as an omission of care, the range of omissions it includes, its emphasis on impact and its accessibility to potential participants due to the clear and concise language and the listing of an array of neglect subtypes.

### **Signs of Neglect**

Despite the variation in definitions of neglect, there is consensus in the literature concerning a range of signs and contributing factors that professionals, including psychotherapists, view as possible indicators of child neglect (Pearce & Pezzot Pearce, 2013). However, it is important to acknowledge that signs vary considerably from child to child (Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016; Pearce & Pezzot Pearce, 2013) so, while there are signs which most often correlate with neglect, there is no checklist of specific indicators of neglect. The signs most often associated with neglect can be observed across a vast range of domains when pertaining to the individual child. Physical symptoms may include a child being underweight or quite overweight, tired or presenting with injuries associated with lack of supervision (Burgess & Daniel, 2011). Behavioural symptoms of child neglect and child maltreatment in general are often expressed through two behavioural processes, internalising and externalising behaviours. Some studies claim that externalising behaviours, characterised by aggression, are more often associated with boys, while internalising behaviours,



characterised by anxiety or depression, are mostly associated with girls (Hanson et al., 2008; Yates et al., 2003). In their systemic review of the behavioural features of school-aged children associated with neglect and emotional abuse, Maguire et al. (2015) found vastly opposing results across studies, with some finding only a correlation between neglect and internalising behaviours, while most reported externalising problems as closely associated with neglect and emotional abuse. In their review, the data regarding emotional abuse may have skewed the results for neglect, but the co-morbidity of maltreatment types makes it difficult to isolate neglect for study, further laying claim to the difficulty in firmly defining neglect.

Developmental indicators of neglect which are most often recognised in academic and social spheres include delayed language development, poor peer relations, lower IQ scores, and low academic performance (Naughton et al., 2013). Kendall-Tackett and Eckenrode (1996) found neglect alone equally detrimental to grades and number of suspensions from school as neglect in combination with physical or sexual abuse. In their 2017 quantitative study of 133 12-14-year olds in residential care, Moreno-Manso et al. found a strong correlation between physical neglect and an array of difficulties in psychosocial adaptation. Interestingly, the researchers found psychosocial difficulties to persist more in school, socially and personally, rather than in familial relationships. However, one could argue that living in a residential setting, away from immediate family, would leave this outcome difficult to generalise. Furthermore, adaptation can be very much associated with insecure parental attachments. Therefore, the participants may have a history of adapting within familial relationships. Maguire and Naughton (2016) further explain that indicators of child neglect can be found in the relationship between the parent and the child, wherein there persists an insecure attachment with parental disinterest in the child as a dominant characteristic in parent child interactions. This parental disinterest, in most cases, is not due

to any ill intention on the part of the parent, rather it is the result of the parent's focus on stressors external to their relationship with their child (Friedman & Billick, 2015). These stressors can be deemed contributing factors to child neglect.

### **Contributing Factors to Neglect**

Poverty, above all, is considered the lead contributing factor to child neglect (Jonson-Reid et al., 2012). While there is an array of individual and family-based factors which contribute to neglect in the home (Peyton, 2012; Swenson & Chaffin, 2006), ongoing structural issues in society, particularly the role of poverty, must first be acknowledged when considering the causes of and contributions to neglect. The primary responses to neglect, which appear to manifest in the provision of support, training and intervention at the level of the individual family, seem to overlook the wider societal issue of poverty, despite the considerable evidentiary link between poverty and neglect. In their 2016 review of the evidentiary links between poverty and child abuse and neglect, Bywaters et al. emphasised a “substantial body of evidence” (2016b, p.21) which strongly indicates a correlation between poverty and child maltreatment. While also acknowledging the complexities surrounding research and intervention for cases of child neglect and the role of bias in the engagement of child protection services with families of differing socio-economic levels, Bywaters et al. (2016b) distinguish direct links between poverty and neglect, such as lack of money, and indirect causal links between poverty and neglect, such as parental stress. In many ways, one could argue that several of the contributory factors to neglect, which are explored below, can be considered effects and manifestations of poverty which impact on the potentiality for neglect. In other words, as Shanahan et al. (2017, p.2) posits, poverty is not a risk factor in itself for physical neglect as many parents in poverty do not neglect their children, rather

“other risk factors for physical neglect, which tend to cluster among impoverished individuals, lead to the higher occurrence of physical neglect among those living in poverty”.

Parental contributory factors can include parental substance misuse, a contributory factor highly correlated with child neglect (Peyton, 2012; Swenson & Chaffin, 2006), criminal offending of parent, historic childhood abuse of parent (Mulder et al., 2018), intellectual ability of parent (Swenson & Chaffin, 2006) and parental burnout (Mikolajczak et al., 2018). Mulder et al. (2018) found no significant difference between mothers and fathers regarding parental contributory factors in their meta-analysis. Beyond the parent, negative child peer groups, child medical conditions and neighbourhood burden also hold strong correlations with childhood neglect (Swenson & Chaffin, 2006). In all, the empirical data indicates that contributory factors to neglect can come from a broad range of sources, including the parent, the community and the wider environment. However, to reflect on the remarks by Shanahan et al. (2017), it is important to remember that these are *risk* factors, not identifiers that neglect is taking place.

### **Protective Factors**

In considering protective factors that buffer against the contributory factors to childhood neglect, the broader empirical literature on child maltreatment must be explored, as it is difficult to uncover and isolate protective factors for neglect. Protective factors against child maltreatment, including neglect, are often categorised at the level of the individual child or the level of their societal context. On a personal level, individual traits such as good communication and social skills can act as a buffer (Holmes et al., 2018; Khambati et al., 2018). Resilience is deemed a protective trait, however the data is unclear for neglect specifically as opposed to other forms of maltreatment (Ben-David & Jonson-Reid, 2017). In their longitudinal UK study using a sample of 13,954 participants, Khambati et al. found “insufficient evidence to suggest that family factors were associated with resilience to

maltreatment” (2018, p.343). While this is an interesting finding, it goes against many studies which claim that protective factors for the family of the neglected child can include social support and practical family resources (Ridings et al., 2017). This leaves one to consider whether obtaining data from a wider study and the possibility of underreporting may have played a role in Khambati et al.’s findings (2018). On a community level, neighbourhood social cohesion has been deemed a protective factor (Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016), along with access to good schools, achievements in school and prosocial community groups (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Swenson & Chaffin, 2006).

While protective factors can be observed on many levels, their influence can be affected by individual differences between children, including age and developmental stage, as well as external factors such as the availability and consistency of wider family support (Wilkinson & Bowyer, 2017). Nevertheless, it would appear from the literature that social interactions, connections and supports play a pivotal role in protecting children from maltreatment of all kinds. Additionally, Sattler and Font (2018, p.107) recently published their quantitative, longitudinal study of 5,501 children across the United States using the “National Survey of Child and Adolescent Wellbeing”. They found that cumulative protective factors over time are more effective than individual ones at specific times. Therefore, it seems it is not to be argued which is the most effective intervention, rather the focus should be on facilitating an array of interventions to prevent, minimise or address the contributory factors to neglect, and thus, its effects.

### **Effects in Childhood**

The effects of childhood neglect are numerous due to the range and prevalence of contributory and protective factors, as well as individual variations between children (Holmes et al., 2018; White et al., 2012). Across the literature, physical, psychological, social and behavioural effects of neglect have been documented (Burgess & Daniel, 2011). While many

of the childhood effects of neglect, such as behavioural issues, can be observed as signs of neglect, other effects often persist beneath the surface. In considering literature with which to lay the foundation for this study, this research focused on the effects specific to neglect rather than effects of general maltreatment, adverse childhood experiences or developmental trauma. While neglect is a component within these larger umbrella terms and most children of neglect also experience another form of child abuse (Bartlett et al., 2017), it became clear that a focus on effects of neglect specifically needed to be prioritised for this literature review, where possible, rather than a generalisation of the effects of child maltreatment as a whole.

One of the most striking findings in the literature on childhood neglect concerns the discovery that, in many ways, cumulative risk theory does not hold up when applied to the effects of childhood maltreatment (O'Hara et al., 2015). This indicates that experiencing an array of childhood abuses and neglect together does not mean the effects are worse for the individual child, rather, in some domains of childhood development, the effects are greater for neglect in isolation without other abuses taking place. For example, language development and cognitive stimulation has been found to be more impaired by neglect alone than when combined with physical abuse (O'Hara et al., 2015). Similarly, impairments in social functioning and behavioural regulation have been found in adolescents who experienced neglect, even when other maltreatment types were controlled for in the study (Logan-Greene & Semanchin Jones, 2015). Children who experienced neglect alone have also been found to be at greater risk for low academic performance than those who experience other forms of child maltreatment (Chapple & Vaske, 2010).

In terms of child development, neglect can impede physical development due to poor diet, malnutrition or a lack of stimulation. In this way, neglect not only affects the biology of the individual due to inadequate nutrition but the lack of stimulation stunts the development

of motor skills and social skills necessary to engage actively in the world (Horwath, 2013). This is often referred to as “non-organic failure to thrive” (Horwath, 2013, p.17). In terms of cognitive development, following their longitudinal study of survivors of institutional neglect, Stamoulis et al. (2015) found that psychosocial neglect linked significantly to delayed brain activity, while Gerhardt (2014) has long referenced the physiological impact of stress and trauma caused by neglect on the brain development of infants. This points to an understanding that it is not only physical neglect, such as lack of food, shelter or medical care, that is detrimental, but other forms of neglect, such as lack of relational stimulation, lack of opportunities and environmental deprivation have a huge impact on child development (McLaughlin et al., 2017). Concerning the relational aspects of neglect, neglected children have also been found to have difficulties in establishing and maintaining healthy relationships, with their attachment styles categorised as insecure (Horwath, 2013). Furthermore, in terms of mental health, neglect has been found to be a precursor for depressive affect in some children (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002).

As the child moves into adolescence, the effects of neglect continue to impact on their development, with a higher rate of depression exhibited by neglected adolescence than their non-neglected counterparts (Hussey et al., 2006) and a clear relationship found between emotional neglect, more so than emotional abuse, and depressive symptoms in adolescence (Jessar et al., 2017). Significant correlations have also emerged between youth alcohol and drug use and childhood neglect using the Longitudinal Studies on Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN), which have followed more than 1,300 US children and their families since 1991. In their analysis of 965 young people from the LONGSCAN sample who had experienced neglect, Duprey et al. (2017) found an association between internalising behaviours related to neglect and substance use, indicating that youth substance abuse could be a means of managing internalising issues prompted by neglect. Proctor et al. (2017) also

used LONGSCAN to analysis the data of 1,354 children and found a correlation between externalising behaviours linked to both neglect and sexual abuse in childhood and early initiation of alcohol and marijuana use in adolescence. Some studies have also shown that those who experienced neglect in childhood have experienced suicidal ideation in adolescence and made more suicide attempts than their non-neglected counterparts (Choi et al., 2017; Kwok & Gu, 2018). However, Kwok & Gu (2018) also found a positive correlation between hope as a protective factor and the lessening of suicidal ideation following childhood neglect.

The possible negative effects in childhood and adolescence that are associated with neglect are immense, but a correlation has also been found between childhood maltreatment and post-traumatic growth in adolescence, which can carry on into adulthood. Some individuals go on to thrive through post-traumatic growth (Mohr & Rosén, 2017), which is often attributed to protective factors that buffered against trauma in childhood. However, these findings are linked to generalised child maltreatment and do not focus directly on the relationship between neglect specifically and posttraumatic growth or resilience. There is a dearth of literature in this area (Ben-David & Jonson-Reid, 2017) with cautious indications to be found, such as Sroufe et al.'s (1999) distinction between adaptive and maladaptive developmental outcomes, which states that many neglected children turn out to be well adjusted.

Overall, in considering the childhood effects of neglect, this is not an extensive list and other effects can still be linked to neglect. The aim here is more so to illuminate the diverse and holistic nature of effects to child development caused by neglect. In observing these effects, a pessimistic picture emerges. It seems the association between neglect and negative outcomes in childhood is, unfortunately, quite apparent. However, individual resilience as a risk or protective factor, may also be an effect of neglect, rather than merely a

buffer. More research into the association between resilience and neglect would be welcomed and may provide a brighter picture for those who experience neglect and the psychotherapists who work with them.

### **Long-term Effects of Neglect**

In uncovering the long-term effects of neglect, one must first consider the effects in childhood which persist into adulthood. Furthermore, for those who endure childhood maltreatment or adverse childhood experiences, there is a higher risk of a plethora of physical and mental health issues in adulthood (Taylor et al., 2015). Continuing on from effects in adolescence, Kisely et al.'s large-scale quantitative study (2020) found neglect positively correlated with a "life-time diagnoses of an alcohol use disorder" (p.61). Other forms of abuse were not found to correlate significantly with alcohol use disorders. Regarding cognitive processing, Glaser (2000) points to limitations in the executive functioning of adults who were neglected in childhood. While neglect has, in some cases, pointed to greater suicide risk in adolescence (Kwok & Gu, 2018), Behr Gomes Jardim et al.'s cross-sectional study of 449 individuals aged 60 or over (2018), found that physical neglect alone did not correlate with later life suicide risk. This points to other forms of neglect as the link in this case but lack of research into neglect subtypes (Jonson-Reid et al., 2012) leaves this, as of yet, unclear. Childhood adversity, such as neglect, has also been connected to increased risk of adult psychopathology, including mood disorders, depression and psychosis (Bjorkenstam et al., 2017; Martins et al., 2014; Read et al., 2008) but, again, limited research into neglect specifically leaves this finding more generalised across the childhood trauma research. Further psychological issues in adulthood concern relational difficulties borne of a childhood of insecure attachment, the legacy of which has been tentatively linked to an increase in violent and criminal behaviour in adulthood, according to Bland et al. (2018). Their review indicates a stronger correlation between child neglect and violence in adulthood than physical



abuse and violence in adulthood, in contrast to the assumed hypothesis “the cycle of violence” (p.126).

It appears that the effects of neglect in childhood persist for many into adulthood and can cause impairments in a range of areas. However, most studies in this area are quantitative studies, many using data from larger-scale surveys (Kisely et al., 2020) or reviews of studies across the maltreatment literature (Bland et al., 2018). In this way, it is evident that the effects of neglect need to be researched more specifically, and qualitative studies, of which there are few, need to be developed to give greater weight to the claims made here.

### **Theoretical Frameworks applicable to Childhood Neglect**

The effects of neglect and the theories applied to the phenomenon rarely apply to neglect itself, rather they apply to the greater issue of child maltreatment or to even more generalised theories of individual and societal norms. Thus, the theoretical frameworks that can be applied to neglect within the context of child maltreatment come from a broad range of perspectives, including developmental, environmental and sociological theories. While these differing theories approach the phenomenon of child maltreatment from a range of viewpoints, according to Pearce and Pezzot-Pearce (2013, p.2), “attempts to understand human development from the perspective of just one discipline do injustice to its complexity”. Therefore, it is the integration and collaboration between these theoretical perspectives that gives the best overview of the phenomenon of childhood neglect.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Dr Kempe’s “Battered Child Syndrome” (Kempe et al., 1962, p.17) was an early theory of child abuse, which placed greater emphasis on the role of the individual over the social context. It considered the mental wellbeing of the parent as a possible indicator of the development of child abuse in the home and came from a medical perspective. Today, remnants of Kempe’s perspective can be found in the acknowledgement of parental mental illness, addiction and intellectual disability as

contributing factors to child neglect. But, over time, more sociological theories applicable to child maltreatment developed, including Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) which considered the child, parent and family's place within the wider society and the influences that permeate back and forth. This can be very much seen today in the societal risk and protective factors associated with neglect, including neighbourhood social cohesion, socio-economic status of the community and peer group influence. Further sociological theories include labelling theory (Becker, 2008), which suggests that labels applied to certain groups in society lead those groups to conform to the label and engage in deviant or abusive behaviour. While the research into this perspective with regard to child neglect is thin on the ground, research has shown that social work intervention is very much a feature of lower socio-economic areas due to the understood connection between low socio-economic status and exposure to adverse childhood experiences (Finkelhor et al., 2015) with Parton claiming "the process of labelling [neglect] is essentially a moral/political process" (1995, p. 73). Furthermore, Bernard & Greenwood (2019) found in their qualitative study of social workers in the UK that affluent families can evade social workers better than non-affluent families by using their privilege as a strategy to avoid intervention or detection.

Child development theories are the perspectives most associated with psychotherapeutic assessment and intervention for maltreated children and their families. These include attachment theory, psychosocial theory, object relations theory, and social cognitive theory, to name a few. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 2012) prioritises the relational attachment patterns between parent and child, and therapeutic interventions underpinned by this theory seek to address insecure attachments and establish a more secure base for the child. Psychosocial theory is used to frame interventions with children who may not have reached Erikson's proposed stages of development and their families (Newman & Newman, 2009) and is most linked to psychodynamic psychotherapy. Object relations theory also

considers the relationship between the individual child and the world around them (Scharff, 1996). “Splitting”, a division into either/or, is a coping strategy employed by the maltreated child from this object relations perspective (Lowe, 2016, p.59). Winnicott (1958) also posits that once the physical and psychological needs of a child are facilitated by the parent, the child develops a capacity to be alone. However, in a neglectful relationship, the child’s ability to comfortably exist in a connected yet independent relationship with others is limited by their preoccupation with having their basic needs met by the parent. Interestingly, Winnicott takes a phenomenological perspective in this regard, theorising that “the infant cannot become an infant unless linked to maternal care” (Scharff, 1996, p.226), so that the very being of the infant in the world is compromised if the maternal relationship is neglectful. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) further recognises the relationship between learning gained from societal influences and the agency of the individual. Modelling interventions based on this theory are conducted in cognitive psychotherapy and in the development of parenting programmes. In this regard, Azar et al. (2017) found a clear link between mothers’ social cognitive processing and maladaptive beliefs concerning neglect-based injury prevention for their children. However, while Azar et al.’s study (2017) included the child’s gender as a factor in the analysis, the study did not mention fathers or others who may engage in a similar parental role. This reflects the reference to mothers across developmental theories. As these theories were proposed in a different era, the evolution of parenting roles and gender must be taken into account when considering the contemporary family.

In addition to the long-standing child developmental theories outlined thus far, contemporary theories of personal wellbeing are used within individual psychotherapy to promote a sense of agency for those who have experienced maltreatment or adversity in childhood. These theories include resilience theory (Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993), which posits that it is the individual’s response to the experience, the protective social factors in

place and the resources provided, rather than the experience itself, which can dictate the outcome. Hope theory (Snyder, 2000) prioritises a focus on individual goals, pathways and agency, and wellbeing theory, a theoretical model put forth by Martin Seligman (2012), aims to establish the individual's growth and happiness through a range of avenues including the development of positive relationships, meaning making and personal accomplishment. While few of these theoretical perspectives, be they medical, sociological, environmental, developmental, or psychological, reference childhood neglect, they provide a holistic understanding of the societal and individual norms of which neglect, in many ways, sits outside. Many psychotherapeutic and psychological interventions aimed at supporting neglected children through individual child therapy, parental support, community support or individual support in adulthood draw from these theoretical models and are discussed in the next section.

### **Interventions for Child Neglect**

While this study places a keen focus on psychotherapy and its approach to childhood neglect, it was deemed appropriate to include other forms of intervention within this review as specific psychotherapeutic interventions for neglect have been limited thus far. However, in considering interventions for child neglect, the significant barriers to engaging with any form of support for child neglect, including psychotherapy, must first be acknowledged. With poverty widely recognised as the leading contributory factor to child neglect in the home (Jonson-Reid et al., 2012), the difficulties in availing of interventions for those living in poverty are numerous. Therefore, while there are many interventions on many levels outlined below, the structural issues which make accessing and engaging in psychotherapeutic interventions difficult for disadvantaged groups must first be explored.

### ***Barriers to Access & Engagement with Interventions***

The barriers to psychotherapeutic and psychological interventions can be observed primarily in cases involving families and individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This can be for several reasons. Firstly, the practical barriers for potential clients, including “lack of money to buy in support” (Bywaters et al., 2016b), lack of transport, lack of childcare and lack of information can greatly determine initial engagement with services and consistent participation over time (Santiago et al., 2013). Secondly, apart from the practical barriers to engagement, parental stressors and parental burnout (Mikolajczak et al., 2018) can also be considered barriers which impede parents and children from accessing supports or attending psychotherapy sessions regularly, which, in themselves, may even serve to exacerbate these stressors associated with child neglect. Furthermore, the internalised stigma for parents surrounding poverty, social work involvement, child maltreatment interventions and therapy can greatly impede a parent’s willingness to engage with interventions (Hooper et al., 2007). This can be observed in Hughes et al.’s narrative study of mothers involved with child welfare services, in which the mothers describe feeling judged, intensely surveilled and perceiving that professionals viewed them as “failed mothers” (2016, p.347). Challenges to engagement with interventions can also be observed from the perspective of the professionals, particularly regarding professionals’ lack of knowledge and understanding of the culture or economic status of the families with whom they work (Delgadillo, 2018). This further argues the premise of labelling theory (Becker, 2008) as a theoretical framework for child neglect and maltreatment, wherein a lack of awareness affects the approach of professionals towards certain disadvantaged groups within society and, in some cases, can lead to biased social work involvement with these groups (Bernard & Greenwood, 2019).

While there are barriers to engagement for both the client and professional, there is evidence to suggest that psychotherapy for those experiencing traumas within situations of poverty can be beneficial (Santiago et al., 2013). However, there is a general consensus among researchers and practitioners that interventions are most effective when part of a multi-level, multi-disciplinary approach (Barth, 2009; Okato et al., 2018) to addressing the complex intersections between child maltreatment and the systemic and individual barriers to engagement. Thus, the interventions explored below must be understood and implemented within a wider context of supports. These interventions are categorised across four demographics, namely interventions with the child, the parent, the community, and interventions for adults who experienced neglect as children.

### ***Child-focused Interventions***

Despite the concerning trends in child neglect prevalence, few therapeutic interventions have been designed to address child neglect with children directly. In the past, the primary social work intervention was to remove the child from the home (Gershater-Molko et al., 2002) and although this action has been greatly reduced in favour of community support and intervention, the evidence for the effectiveness of routine child mental health care in the community is limited and inconsistencies persist in the literature (Day & Davis, 2006). Peyton (2012), in the National Audit of Neglect in Ireland, noted that children experiencing neglect are less likely to present at clinics or attend appointments, as this is a facet of the neglectful behaviour itself. Given the low rates of disclosure of neglect, possibly due to greater focus on disclosures of sexual or physical abuse, or differing understandings regarding what constitutes neglect (Allnock & Miller, 2013), issues persist in the development of research to ascertain best practice for specific interventions for child neglect. Concerns regarding the ethical implications of researching this population and the complexity of cases of child neglect make it a difficult area in which to research and develop specific

interventions (Urwin, 2007), challenges remain in implementing research findings in real-world settings (Daniel, 2016), and studies conducted in real-world settings have not been able to replicate these high-level outcomes (Swenson et al., 2010; Weisz & Kazdin, 2010), even where evidence based treatments have been used.

Studies under controlled conditions show substantial evidence that psychotherapy with children and adolescents has positive outcomes (James & Mennen, 2001) and therapeutic approaches that are used in direct interventions with neglected children include creative arts therapies, play therapy and family therapy (Clyman, 2000; Glazer & Stein, 2010; Mullen, 2002). It appears that the majority of these therapeutic supports for children, which take place in schools, family support centres, in the home or in private practice, draw from the application of child development theories (Pearce & Pezzot-Pearce, 2013). McElvaney and Lalor (2014), in their review of child abuse interventions, noted that the creative therapies are the most widely used psychological interventions for child abuse in the UK. However, the literature does not indicate that creative therapies are more effective than other therapies in responding to child neglect (Allen et al., 2012; James & Mennen, 2001; Stubenbort et al., 2010). Perhaps this is because creative therapies do not lend themselves well to quantitative, controlled, research settings. Family therapies for child maltreatment, including infant-parent psychotherapy and parent child interaction therapy, are considered effective in that they support the development of secure attachments between parent and child (Cicchetti et al., 2006) and prevent more costly interventions by child welfare systems (Herrenkohl et al., 2016). Psychodynamic psychotherapy has been used by some professionals to explore the child's internalised experience, and behavioural interventions have been used to combat the more externalising behavioural problems presented by some maltreated children (Swenson & Chaffin, 2006). Overall, regardless of approach, Carr (2007) found psychotherapy to be an effective intervention for a range of childhood difficulties,

including abuse and neglect, provided that the intervention considers the age, ability and developmental stage of the child.

While individual child therapy is often facilitated as part of a multi-disciplinary intervention strategy, in the context of services for neglected children, concerns have been raised about lack of communication between professionals and services regarding best practice (Health Service Executive, 2010). Allen et al.'s US-based survey of clinicians working with maltreated children concluded that, without the necessary support or requirements for best practice, psychotherapists revert to working in line with the model of therapy they studied in their initial training, regardless of whether or not the model is empirically supported (2012). Weisz et al. (1995) reported that clinicians ranked research articles and books very low on usefulness, while Chaffin and Friedrich (2004) acknowledge that traditional therapy practices (such as psychodynamic or humanistic approaches) are more widely used than more frequently researched practices such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (TF-CBT) or Parent-Child Interaction Therapy. Furthermore, Mullen (2002, p.115) argues that, in the hope of finding adequate supports for their clients, therapists can "fill in the blanks" when observing a child's play and categorise the child as abused or neglected in the absence of any formal assessment in this regard. While this may be of concern, it may not be as impactful as one would have presumed, as Swenson and Chaffin (2006, p.122) claim that, with regard to abused or neglected children, "last in the social ecology and providing the least relative influence of all the systems is the treatment provider". While training and resources have been developed to support social workers and other practitioners in identifying and intervening in cases of neglect (Burgess et al., 2013), issues persist regarding the identification of neglected children and best practice with which to provide therapeutic interventions to support them (Allnock & Miller, 2013).



### *Parent-focused Interventions*

Many of the contributing factors to child neglect are directly attributed to the parent (Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016), including parental depression, childhood difficulty of parent, limited social skills of parent, young parents with limited education, substance abuse and neurological dysfunction (Swenson & Chaffin, 2005). While there has been an array of interventions designed to mitigate against these risk factors, in Ireland, feedback to the Health Service Executive (2011) has been that most professionals working with vulnerable children are not sure what constitutes neglectful parenting and social workers have a higher threshold for defining inadequate parenting than most other professionals in the field. This correlates with the confusion that persists in the research literature regarding the definition of neglect as opposed to parenting difficulties and has led to the development and adaptation of a plethora of parenting programmes to teach parenting skills, with the aim of preventing and addressing neglect in the family home (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010).

In Ireland, in-home parenting supports are part of several interventions designed for families involved with a local social work department (Peyton, 2012). Parenting programmes accessible in the general community, such as the Triple P parenting programme (Sanders et al., 2001), the Parents Plus programmes (Sharry & Fitzpatrick, 2001) and the Incredible Years programmes (Webster-Stratton, 2003), provide parents with information and techniques to support their child's development and manage difficult behaviour. Programmes such as these are provided in many communities across Ireland (Peyton, 2012) with a clear focus on a combination of social skills practice and child development learning. These programmes are not specifically designed as interventions for parents who have been reported for child neglect, but preliminary research conducted in the United States is promising regarding the effectiveness of the Triple P programme (Prinz et al., 2009) and the Incredible Years programme (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010) with this population. These programmes

aim to prevent neglectful parenting by providing a service for parents to foster their child's emotional and intellectual development and wellbeing.

Contrary to the positive outcomes observed in research into parenting interventions, Chaffin et al. (2001, as cited in Swenson & Chaffin, 2006, p.129) argue “programs to be of little benefit, regardless of dose or intensity of services...if the component interventions themselves are not effective in achieving behaviour change”. Swenson and Chaffin (2006) argue that, unless behavioural change is evident from the parent, parenting programmes or more focused, in-house social work supports, such as individualised parenting plans, financial management, stress reduction and nutritional advice, are ineffective. In considering the individual behavioural change needed from parents, Horwath (2013) further argues that when interventions merely focus on parents' compliance and completion of a programme, we ignore the experience of the neglected child in the home. According to Horwath, success should not be measured by a parent's completion of a course, rather it should be measured by the child's quality of life in the aftermath.

In considering psychotherapeutic interventions, family-focused psychotherapies that address specific issues pertaining to the parent and child have been found to be effective in addressing child maltreatment (Carr, 2007). Multisystemic family therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy for the parent can support individual parents to combat the external stressors that can prompt neglect in the home (Horwath, 2013; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016), however these therapeutic supports are difficult to come by for many families. While parents neglecting their children due to active substance abuse are viewed less favourably than parents who are unable to meet the basic needs of their child due to inability or lack of awareness (Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016), parents who neglect due to substance abuse may have greater access to therapeutic supports, through addiction treatment programmes.

Even in the most tragic of circumstances wherein neglect results in a child fatality, it is unintentional supervisory neglect or environmental neglect that are the primary causes, rather than a lack of food or medical attention (Welch & Bonner, 2013). According to Burgess et al. (2013), a nurturing, professional approach is pivotal in supporting the individual parent, with an awareness of the lack of harmful intention on the part of most parents. In their resource pack for practitioners working with neglected children and their families, Burgess et al. (2013) further highlighted that family-focused intervention teams based out of schools and local resource centres can be an accessible and nurturing support for these parents. Family support services, based in the community, can provide a base and, through trained mental health practitioners, a supportive relationship for parents who may feel guilt, shame or fear following a social work referral for neglect.

### ***Community-focused Interventions***

As outlined in the introduction, poverty is significantly highly correlated with child neglect (Drake, 1996; Freisthler, 2004; Kim, 2004; Jonson-Reid et al., 2012). Therefore, the socio-economic status of the community in which the child resides is particularly influential. Contributory factors to child neglect from within the community include economic instability, neighbourhood burden and poor community organisation (Swenson & Chaffin, 2006). In their quantitative study on the relationship between “neighbourhood social cohesion (mutual trust among neighbours)” and child abuse and neglect, Maguire-Jack and Showalter surveyed 896 parents and concluded, “the neighbourhoods in which parents live have the ability to support or hinder positive parenting practices” (2016, p.31). Interestingly, the authors further concluded that the degree of cohesion between individuals and families in the community was directly linked to child neglect but had no connection to child abuse. They also found that social cohesion contributed some protective factors for neglect, but their influence depended on the contributing factors. For example, neglect caused by an inability to

meet the basic needs of the child could be supported by positive relationships between neighbours, however neglect due to substance abuse could not be supported by the community as such issues may require more complex interventions (Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016).

Maguire-Jack and Showalter (2016) recommend greater emphasis on community initiatives to support social cohesion and a more community-based, social ecology approach appears to be a way forward for psychotherapists who work in this field, as Swenson and Chaffin (2006), argue, “contextual factors are the work of therapy” (p.121). Their 2006 review of the child maltreatment literature concluded with a recommendation for a multi-level approach to child neglect, wherein the psychotherapist engages more actively with the family and community of the target client. These types of interventions “redefine therapists’ roles” and “challenge traditional habits of clinical research and professional practice where researchers and therapists are bound to an office and office hours” (p.134). However, Allin et al. (2005, p.503) argue that, while psychotherapeutic interventions have been deemed beneficial to children and families wherein neglect is an issue, psychotherapy “may not target the root of the problem” so should not be the primary focus of research in the area of child neglect treatment. They maintain that greater focus is required at community level as poverty and other environmental factors remain key indicators of neglect (Allin et al., 2005). In all, it would appear that, while the attention should not solely be focused on psychotherapy to address the complex issue of childhood neglect, in order to develop the effective interventions at any level, further research into psychotherapy with neglected children and their parents, families and communities appears crucial as one part of a wider system of interventions.

## ***Psychotherapeutic Interventions with Adults who Experienced Neglect in Childhood***

In recent years, psychotherapy has made significant strides in the application of more trauma-informed practice (Grossman et al., 2017). Adults who experienced complex trauma in childhood, such as child abuse or neglect, are now better understood through this lens, with therapists and clients developing greater insight into the issues that may be currently affecting the client. Trauma-focused therapy, eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (Shapiro, 2017) and trauma-informed cognitive behavioural therapy, such as dialectical behaviour therapy (Linehan, 2018), have been implemented in individual psychotherapy as means of addressing effects of childhood trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder (Grossman et al., 2017), addiction, depression and anxiety (Carr, 2007). Beyond addressing the effects of trauma, these approaches seek to educate the therapist on the most appropriate and safe means of supporting the client. Linehan (2018), for example, argues that the client must be first equipped with the necessary skills and supports, both in the therapy and outside, before the therapist begins exploring childhood traumas. Delving in too soon can cause re-traumatisation so a step by step, process is deemed the most effective approach, according to Linehan's dialectical behaviour therapy model (2018).

The contemporary approaches outlined above are underpinned by the principles and techniques of the traditional bastions of psychotherapy, which can have much to offer the adult who was neglected in childhood. Humanistic psychotherapy and Roger's core conditions of unconditional positive regard and empathy (Vincent, 2005) can be applicable in addressing the lack of love, time or interest from a parent that many of those neglected in childhood experienced (Burgess et al., 2013). Trauma-informed cognitive behavioural therapy can provide the formerly neglected child with skills to manage thought and behavioural patterns which have persisted into adulthood (Janagan Johnson & James, 2016). Long-term psychodynamic psychotherapy can help adults who have experienced childhood

neglect in addressing the unconscious processing founded in childhood (Bennett, 2012), and existential psychotherapy can support the client to make meaning of their experience and see it as part of a whole life experience (Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2015).

But even in specified, trauma-focused therapies and in the application of traditional modes of psychotherapy, psychotherapists and their clients tend to focus on what happened, rather than that which did not happen (Bennett, 2012). In this way, even in psychotherapy for adults who experienced childhood trauma, neglect can be, for the most part, neglected. Only recently, Hopper et al. (2019, p.1) developed “component-based psychotherapy” for adult survivors of emotional abuse and neglect, the first therapeutic approach designed specifically for emotional abuse and neglect. They posit that relationships for clients with histories of trauma begin from a place of “relational dysregulation” (Hopper et al., 2019, p.19) but that “empathic attunement” and “the experience of having a witness can be transformative” for those who experienced emotional abuse and emotional neglect (p.80). While the advent of a contemporary therapy for emotional abuse and neglect is very much welcomed, psychotherapists must also make sure not to rely too heavily on one specific framework or model, for, as there are no particular contributory factors or effects that make up the maltreated child, so too is there no generalisation of what it is to be an adult who has been neglected as a child. For example, developing a narrative of their experience may be helpful to one client, in order to make meaning and take ownership of their experience, but developing a narrative may lead another client to constantly refer to this narrative and struggle to move forward.

Some researchers claim psychological or psychotherapeutic interventions for those who have experienced child maltreatment, be they adult or child, are ineffective as they are isolated interventions that do not consider the wider context of the family (DePanfilis, 2006), while others claim there are strong foundations in the researching of therapeutic interventions

to warrant further study (Saywitz et al., 2000). Debate also persists regarding the level of intervention, with some studies arguing that family level interventions yield little benefit (Gershater-Molko & Showalter, 2002) and others arguing that early intervention at individual and community level is the answer (Allen et al., 2012). The lack of consensus in this regard is further impeded by the lack of research funding in the area of child neglect (Taylor et al., 2015) and the prioritisation of randomised-control trials over real-world research (National Institute for Health & Clinical Excellence, 2012). There is, however, a developing trend toward more qualitative research in psychotherapy for child maltreatment, which considers the therapeutic process (Kennedy & Midgley, 2007) and the experience of the professionals involved in child maltreatment cases (McTavish et al., 2017). Given the sensitive nature of investigating psychotherapy with vulnerable populations, it is hoped the use of such methodologies may assist in identifying which aspects of psychotherapy best serve which individual and in which context.

In all, it would appear that our knowledge base regarding interventions for childhood neglect should come from an integrative application of both efficacy and effectiveness research, drawing from the statistical, reliable outcomes found in controlled settings and the qualitative, real-world research that gives us a deeper, if more subjective, view of the life world of participants (Glazer & Stein, 2010). But, for now, the gap between the research types leaves practitioners and services caught in the middle, between evidence and experience. The debate rages on between researchers, policy makers, practitioners and parents regarding best practice for intervening with children, families, communities, and adults who have experienced neglect, but, in all the noise, one voice appears to have gone unheard.

## **The Experience of Neglect in Childhood**

Childhood neglect has been termed “a major public health crisis” (Gardner & Cuthbert, 2016, p.5), but it remains overlooked and unseen within the research literature on childhood trauma, which itself has been deemed a hidden epidemic (Van der Kolk, 2015). Fittingly, this mirrors the very nature of neglect itself, wherein the child, and the adult they become, remains overlooked and unseen. Further to this, studies regarding childhood neglect also neglect the voices of those who have experienced neglect themselves, leaving them unseen and, in terms of research, unheard, as children and into adulthood. Studies into the experience of child maltreatment in general have focused on the experience of mandated reporters (McTavish et al., 2017), paediatricians (Wißmann et al., 2019), primary teachers and family support workers (Bullock et al., 2019), parents (Nock & Kazdin, 2001; Yoo & Abiera, 2019) and the lay community (Williams, 2017). Studies on the experiences of the maltreated children, themselves, are generally found in relation to children who have experienced other forms of maltreatment, particularly sexual abuse (Beckett et al., 2015; Horvath et al., 2014), while the voices of the adults who experienced neglect as children could only be found in one practitioners’ book (Bennett, 2012), and nowhere in the empirical literature.

The research into neglect focuses primarily on effects, interventions and the experiences of the professionals involved in cases of neglect. Research into the experience of neglect for children and adults is practically non-existent, and only a handful of studies have been found which include the voice of the individual (Haynes, 2015). In 1998, Bifulco and Moran published a book centred on women’s experiences of abuse and neglect in childhood. While not a research study, they highlighted absence of caregivers, role-reversal with parents and a sense of antipathy from parents as three key facets of the experience of neglect for their clients. Haynes (2015) conducted a study focusing on professionals’ and young people’s experiences and perceptions of systemic approaches to tackling childhood neglect. While the



study focus was not on the experience of neglect itself, it highlighted indirectly what the experience of neglect was like day-to-day and shone at least some light onto the experience of neglect for the child.

It can be argued that child neglect research in the UK by Horwath (2013), Burgess et al. (2014) and Turnbull (2015) has most welcomed the voice of the individual to date. With a focus on planning and intervention strategies, Horwath based her model for neglect intervention on the lived experience of the child, arguing “in order to make sense of neglect so that practitioners can intervene effectively in these children’s lives, it is important to understand the daily lived experience of the neglected child” (2013, p.5). In this light, she developed a strengths-based programme through which practitioners gain an insight into the experience of neglect from children and parents and develop a plan of intervention based on the responses, understanding that the experience of the child will provide key insights into areas for intervention, be they practical, therapeutic, financial, nutritional, medical or educational. Burgess et al.’s 2014 review of services addressing child neglect gave voice to those who have experienced neglect through interviews and discussion groups. While professionals and the general public were also surveyed, the insights of the children who experienced neglect were given special consideration. From the discussion groups of six to eleven-year-olds, a home, food and clothes were considered to be basic needs. Emotional needs, such as praise and cuddles were next identified as important although one child said that while cuddles were important for babies ‘when you are older you can live without cuddles’” (Burgess et al., 2014, p.16). The supportive structures available to the young people in those groups, such as a target board to emphasise the most important needs of a child, enabled them to articulate their experiences, while the quotes included give the researchers greater clarity on the child’s experience and how they make sense of it. Further to this, Michelle Turnbull’s review for the NSPCC, “Hurting Inside” (2015), also gave voice to the experience of the children and young

people who call helplines from situations of neglect. The report includes quotes from child callers as well as insights into the general themes of the calls, including parental alcohol or substance misuse, parental mental health issues, being home alone, a lack of food, and other forms of abuse occurring in the home (Turnbull, 2015).

The focus on the lived experience of the individual granted by those researchers is, unfortunately, quite unique, as much research and intervention into childhood neglect can be drawn away from the child's experience and onto parents' issues, practitioner experiences or politics in systems. Furthermore, even fewer studies give voice to the adults who were neglected as children. In fact, across the literature, one only author could be found who focused exclusively on the experience of neglect from the perspective of surviving adults. Lori Bennet's 2012 book, while not research-based, is an account of her psychotherapy sessions with adults who were neglected in childhood, with the voices and experiences of her clients at the core of the book. Chapters entitled "The Broken Promise of Love" (p.57) and "But Nothing Happened!" (p.3) give the reader an insight into the lived experience of neglect for Bennett's adult clients, with Bennett arguing that emotional neglect needs to be given greater weight in the work psychotherapists do with their clients who have experienced maltreatment as children. Bennett's focus on the experiences of her clients gives a more evocative tone than the research studies presented in this literature review, and her focus on adults who were neglected as children gives a deeper, more retrospective insight into the experience of neglect, as well as the effects it has had on her clients in adulthood.

While insightful and informative, Bennett's book is the extent of the psychotherapy literature which privileges the experience of childhood neglect for the adult who has emerged from it. Although it's not a research study, I, as the researcher in this study, found her focus on adults who were neglected as children to be an intriguing approach. While the child who is experiencing neglect may not be able to consent, make sense of or reflect on their experience

of neglect, the adult who was neglected in childhood could possibly give greater retrospective insights into the experience of neglect, which would serve to inform psychotherapists working with children, adolescents and adults who have experienced neglect, and also contribute a unique voice to the empirical literature.

## **Conclusion**

While there is reliable and insightful research, theory and practice concerning the contributing factors, protective factors, effects, and interventions for childhood neglect, evidently, there remains much more to do in terms of understanding adults' experiences of neglect in childhood. This review has highlighted several reasons for this dearth in literature, including persistent issues in defining neglect and barriers to research. In all, psychotherapeutic and psychological theories and interventions for child maltreatment, including neglect, are diverse in approach, but it would appear a multi-level approach is the most favourable, considering the wide array of contributory factors and protective factors associated with child neglect that have been presented in this chapter. Studies focused on these contributory and protective factors, as well as the effects of neglect, comprise the majority of the empirical literature on the subject. In contrast, the silence within the research literature from those who experienced neglect seems deafening.

Above all, this review of the literature has uncovered a need within the research community for greater acknowledgement and application of the voices of those adults who have experienced child neglect. As the effects of neglect in childhood and into adulthood are so vast and the prevalence of reported neglect remains concerningly high globally, it seems certain that many psychotherapists in Ireland and across the world are conducting therapy sessions, facilitating support groups and answering calls from adults who experienced neglect in childhood. Therefore, this study has sought to focus on the experiences of adults who were neglected as childhood, with the purpose of informing psychotherapists, contributing to the

research base, and, above all, giving voice to the adults who have, as of yet, gone unheard in the empirical literature on childhood neglect.

## **Chapter 3. Methodology**

Whoever is searching for the human being first must find the lantern.

(Nietzsche, as cited by Van Manen, 2016, p.4)

### **Introduction**

The following chapter will outline and examine the chosen methodology for this study on adults' experiences of neglect in childhood. It will explore the methodology at different levels and detail its application to the research question, "what are people's lived experiences of being neglected in the family during their childhood?" It will begin with clarification of the aims and objectives of the study, followed by an exploration of the chosen methodology, Van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology, and an explanation as to why it is deemed the most suitable methodology to answer the research question. Further discussion will follow regarding the ethical considerations required for this study and research rigour.

### **Study Aims and Objectives**

The overall aim was to gain a greater understanding of adults' experiences of neglect in childhood and the legacy of this neglect in adulthood. The objectives within this aim were:

- To contribute to the understanding of the experience of neglect in childhood and its legacy into adulthood
- To enable therapists and other professionals to recognise the place of neglect within the broader issue of child maltreatment

- To give voice to the participants, allowing their experiences to be officially recorded and acknowledged within the empirical literature

## **Methodology**

The chosen methodology for this study can best be described at two levels; firstly, as a qualitative study, and secondly, as a hermeneutic phenomenological study centred on the approach of Max Van Manen. The following section explores the chosen methodology from these two levels.

### ***Qualitative Methodology***

According to Saldana (2011, p.4), qualitative research methods are “methods for the study of natural social life”. Qualitative studies are conducted as a means of gaining deeper understanding of a particular life phenomenon through the analysis of data such as interviews or observations (Lutz & Knox, 2014). In the qualitative approach, the researcher is granted flexibility, and participants’ expression and behaviour are welcomed as tangible data (Robson, 2002). Thus, qualitative inquiry allows and often privileges the individual participant’s contribution and brings a depth of inquiry that is not possible through quantitative methods (Silverman, 2010). For while quantitative methodologies play an important role in the human sciences through achieving “paradigmatic knowing”, qualitative approaches provide a “narrative knowledge” of human existence (McLeod, 2015, p.2). For these reasons, a qualitative approach is often the favoured method by human scientists (Sloan & Bove, 2014), as is the case here.

For this study specifically, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as the aim of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of a small number of participants. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research in the area of childhood neglect and, as

of the completion of this study, there are no research studies in the empirical literature which use a qualitative approach to uncover the experiences of adults who were neglected in childhood. Therefore, a qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable and effective means of addressing the research question.

### ***Phenomenology***

Within the qualitative framework, a phenomenological approach was considered the most fitting method of inquiry for this study. Originally born out of continental philosophy, phenomenology, as both a philosophy and a methodology (Silverman, 2010), seeks to uncover the meaning of experience and establish what it is really like to experience a certain phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). While there are many strands of phenomenology, developed by phenomenologists including Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Gadamar, to name a few (Moran, 2000), all phenomenology seeks “to uncover the life-world or human experience as it is lived” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p.8). Phenomenology places its emphasis on the actual lived experience of the individual, rather than the individual’s opinions or theories on a phenomenon. In this regard, phenomenology privileges ontology over epistemology as a vehicle for achieving authentic understanding of being; it is “focused on a mode of being rather than the epistemological mode of knowing” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p.7), believing that human beings must “discover what lies at the ontological core of our being” (Van Manen, 1984, p.39).

For this study on adults’ experiences of neglect in childhood, phenomenology was deemed the most effective and appropriate of the qualitative methodologies primarily due to its focus on the lived experience. This study aimed to uncover what it is really like to experience neglect. It sought to focus on each participant’s “life-world” (Moran et al., 2012, p.191) and get as close as possible to their experience, rather than documenting more

removed, conceptualised views of life periods. In this light, phenomenology was a natural fit. Other qualitative methodologies, such as grounded theory and narrative analysis were initially explored but, in considering the aim and objectives of the study, it was determined that phenomenological inquiry would provide the most relevant and richest data.

The next decision concerned which phenomenological approach would best serve the study. Within the realm of phenomenological inquiry, there are two distinct circles: pure or descriptive phenomenology and interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Phenomenology was initially developed by Edmund Husserl, whom many would argue to be the father of phenomenology (Bernet et al., 2005). Husserl's approach, known as "pure phenomenology", aims to uncover the "essence" of an experience, something that translates universally among all those who have experienced a specific phenomenon (Husserl, 2014, p.57). In conducting phenomenological inquiry, Husserl believed one could "bracket" one's assumptions or interpretations through the process of "epoché", and purely describe the essence of a particular human experience (Husserl, 2014, p.109). Husserl's student Heidegger, the founder of hermeneutic phenomenology, disagreed with his mentor on this point, arguing that one's experience of a phenomenon cannot be universally applied and that one experiences a phenomenon in the context of our background, culture, beliefs and other subjective realities. In this way, "while Husserl steps out of the world to grasp the meaning from above, Heidegger stays in the world of beings in order to understand their modes of being from within the world" (Van Manen, 2014, p.220). In terms of this study, as observed in the literature review, neglect is borne of the actions of others and the environment in which one lives. In this light, it would be difficult to consider that any potential participants or I, as the researcher and a therapist working in the field, would be capable of bracketing off our experiences. Therefore, in considering the most appropriate phenomenological methodology



for this study, it became clear early on that the best way of approaching this research was from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective.

### ***Hermeneutic Phenomenology***

Heidegger (1996) disagreed with Husserl's claim that one could bracket one's prejudices or assumptions and engage in pure description of experience, rather he believed that interpretation was a necessary and unavoidable process within phenomenology. Thus, Heidegger's new form of phenomenology became known as interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology. Over time, many notable philosophers and researchers aligned themselves with hermeneutic phenomenology, including Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Ricoeur and, in more recent times, Max Van Manen. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach of Van Manen will be discussed further below, but, here, the founding principles of hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy will first be explored.

Building on the descriptive foundation of Husserl's pure phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology's focus on interpretation arose from Heidegger's view that subjective meaning is always attributed to a phenomenon. Thus, hermeneutic phenomenology utilises description and interpretation from both participant and researcher, with consideration for reflection and time in its philosophy and application. According to hermeneutic phenomenological principles, humans exist contextually in a state of "being-in-the-world" (1996, p.50), which he referred to as "dasein" (1996, p.7). Dasein is a term which recognises that human beings are not isolated beings and thus cannot experience anything beyond the realms of their life-world. Heidegger argues that we are incapable of looking outside our life-world to achieve an objective understanding of any experience. In other words, one universal truth is not possible. However, Heidegger proposed that, while humans cannot understand one truth, they can each make meaning out of "their truth" as they experience it in their life-

world (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p.16), and one subjective, interpreted truth can be just as valid as one seemingly shared. In the formation of this truth, Heidegger's ontological approach considered both the experience and the meaning drawn from that experience, the interpretation, as parallel processes that occur in tandem, rather than one after the other. Therefore, while Husserl maintained that purely descriptive experience could be achieved, Heidegger argued that meaning is not attributed to a phenomenon after it has occurred; the meaning of the experience is present in the experience itself.

The ordinary acts of seeing, touching, and hearing are not interpreted sensory acts but already acts of meaning before we can abstract them into sensory moments. What we "first" hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the phone, the door, the motorcycle. (Van Manen, 2014, p.108)

Unpacking further Heidegger's understanding of meaning existing within experience, another of Heidegger's principles considers the context of these experiences. He argued that in our existence human beings are in constant relationship with our life-world, or "the they" as he termed it (Heidegger, 1996, p.107); we influence them, and they influence us. We are always in relationship with the other, be that objects, people or even time, which falls under Heidegger's principle of "temporality" (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p.8). In this way, Heidegger posits that we are constantly influenced by the world we live in, the people we live and work with, our community and our culture, all of which Heidegger refers to as "the they" (1996, p.107). We are incapable of having or interpreting any experience beyond our life-world, beyond our relationship with 'the they'. In relating to 'the they', Heidegger suggests that there is a pressure to be what others want or expect us to be and, in response to this, we can allow ourselves to become the property of 'the they'. When we choose to live this way, we are being inauthentic, we are being just like everyone else, in a state of "das Man"

(McKinney, 2018, p.430). Authentic existence is another important foundation of his philosophy. Heidegger argues that we should all strive to engage with our life-world from a place of authenticity, rather than inauthenticity. From an existential mindset, Heidegger's authenticity refers to an "authentic being-towards-death" in that we should all be engaging with our life-world with the awareness that we are "forerunning toward death"; only then can we begin to truly, authentically connect with the people, environments and experiences within our life-world (Heidegger, 1996, p.240; Heidegger, 1992, p.319).

Heidegger's principles of 'dasein' or 'being-in-the-world', 'das Man' or 'the they', temporality, interpretation, authenticity and 'being-towards-death' spoke to many philosophers throughout the world. Today, Max Van Manen's work remains true to these Heideggerian principles, while applying them to more contemporary human experiences. In this way, Van Manen's work is a perfect illustration of Heidegger's principle of "dasein" (1996, p.7). He draws from the traditions of hermeneutic phenomenology but also understands that the contexts of our modern life-worlds need to be considered in the phenomenological inquiry of today.

According to Van Manen (1984, p.38) phenomenological research is, above all, a process of "thoughtfulness" and "a search for what it means to be human". In the application of a phenomenological methodology, one aims "to come to an intimate awareness and deep understanding of how humans experience something" (Saldana, 2011, p.8). Furthermore, this awareness and understanding can only be found "in the primordially of lived experience" (Van Manen, 2014, p.109). In considering the lived experiences of individuals today, Van Manen contextualises the individual's life-world within their cultural, historical and linguistic traditions to uncover their true experience, recognising the "cultural and gendered contexts of interpretive meaning" (Levering & Van Manen, 2002, p.283). This approach to inquiry requires in depth exploration on the part of the researcher. Van Manen achieves this depth or

inquiry through several stages of “phenomenological reflection” (Van Manen, 1984, p.59) and a distinct linguistic approach.

In the search for the experience, Van Manen places strong emphasis on language as he claims, “language is the house of being” (2014, p.110). Like Heidegger, Van Manen argues that language is not a mere reflection of being but a key component of human existence and the birthplace of being, for “in saying, there constantly lies a relation to something to be said and to what is said. Even silence is a form of saying”, (Van Manen, 2014, p.110). Throughout Van Manen’s approach, language is vital in discovering the meaning of a human experience and achieving a deeper, authentic understanding of a phenomenon. Thus, within the analysis, Van Manen encourages the researcher to contribute to the language of the study through reflective writing and interviewing, and researcher “thoughtfulness” (Van Manen, 1984, p.38). The language of the researcher is then honoured as part of the research itself. Further exploration of Van Manen’s methodological process will be addressed in the application section of this chapter.

The debate between descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology continues, however, in considering the phenomenon of neglect, the hermeneutic approach really spoke to the aims and objectives of this study in that it shows consideration for the context in which each individual experiences a phenomenon, with a respect for honouring the voice of the individual. As neglect concerns an omission of care, context is a very important facet of the experience that cannot be ignored, and, as mentioned earlier, it would have been very difficult for the participants and researcher to bracket some of what may have been experienced in their life-world. This is due to the influence long-term neglect can have on the development and lifepath of individual participants (Finkelhor et al., 2015), and the experience I, the researcher, have gained in working as a psychotherapist with neglected children. Furthermore, this study on adults’ experience of childhood neglect aimed to elicit

the experiences of a small number of individuals as part of a doctorate research project rather than solely establishing a universal essence of what it means to experience neglect. For these reasons, Van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology was considered most appropriate for this study.

Prior to exploring the application of the methodology, it is important to note that other approaches to hermeneutic phenomenology were initially considered for this study, including Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009). IPA has become popular in recent years, but I echo Van Manen's concerns regarding its phenomenological foundations. He argues that IPA breaks down phenomena into simplified categories and holds a focus on the person, rather than on the phenomenon. In further critiquing the structured, specific approach to data analysis in IPA, Van Manen argues, "there is no step-by-step model that will guarantee phenomenological insights and understandings" (2017, p.777). Alternatively, hermeneutic phenomenology should, as Heidegger posits, "let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (1962, p.58). In this vein, hermeneutic phenomenology is a humble and reflective approach to the search for meaning, facilitating a respect for the phenomenon and the experiences and voices of the participants, which this study on adults' lived experiences of childhood neglect sought to privilege.

### **Application of Methodology**

In hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, Van Manen suggests that "the notion of "method" has to be understood variously and sometimes ambiguously. This is unavoidable and even desirable" (2014, p.21). While I was both reassured and intimidated by this stance in developing the methods of research for this study, I found it beneficial in that it allowed reflection and deep consideration of what would be the most suitable, sensitive, effective and

ethical means of approaching research into the phenomenon of childhood neglect. The specific applications of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry that were subsequently applied to this study are outlined here, beginning with participant recruitment methods and criteria, followed by a description of the means of data collection, and an explanation on the method of data analysis, in accordance with Van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology.

### ***Number of Participants***

For this phenomenological study on people's experiences of neglect in childhood, fifteen participants was deemed a sufficient amount. The term "sample size" is not appropriate in this study, as this would inherently suggest that the sample can be representative of a larger population, which is not believed to be the case from a phenomenological perspective (Van Manen, 2016, p.352). Fifteen participants is comparable with other phenomenological studies conducted at doctorate level (Turpin et al., 1997) and a small number of participants, such as this, is often the case in hermeneutic phenomenological studies (Van Manen, 2016).

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

According to Glover (2014, p.143), "a reasonably homogenous group of respondents" is necessary to achieve the aims and objectives of a hermeneutic phenomenological study. In terms of this study, the participants all needed to have experienced neglect in the family during their childhood, but I, as the researcher, also understood that there would be subjective aspects of each individual's experience of the phenomenon of neglect. The following inclusion criteria was therefore established to ensure homogeneity among participants, while considering their subjective experiences:

1. Adults who have experienced neglect as children in the family
2. Have discussed and reported this experience to a professional in the past, perhaps a counsellor
3. Between the ages of 18 and 45
4. Resident in Ireland

The inclusion criteria were devised following an extensive literature review and consultation with supervisors, with the aim of narrowing the prospective client group to obtain homogeneity and take into account Heideggerian phenomenology's principle of temporality (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). The criteria also attempt to widen the prospective client group by acknowledging that there are a variety of neglect subtypes and neglect mainly co-exists with other forms of child maltreatment (Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). Following the initial development of these criteria, an amendment was made to increase the age range to 50 years old, to better ensure recruitment of fifteen participants.

### ***Participant Recruitment***

In sourcing participants for this study, I sought to best ensure that any historical abuse or neglect experienced by the participants had been reported to Tusla, so as not to instigate a process of mandated reporting or cause further trauma. In this regard, recruitment was initially considered via the National Counselling Service, however, a lengthy process for ethical applications and an array of approvals necessary across the organisation made this approach to recruitment unfeasible within the timeframe of this study. Subsequently, it was deemed most appropriate and achievable for potential participants to be sourced via independent psychotherapy practitioners. This avenue for recruitment provided the same level of assurance regarding previous reporting of abuse or neglect and also established that

potential participants would have engaged in psychotherapy and could, therefore, be more willing and able to speak on their lived experiences than those who had not.

Once the recruitment avenue was established, psychotherapists' emails were sourced from the websites of the Irish Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP) and the Irish Association of Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy (IAHIP). Only psychotherapists who specified *abuse* or *neglect* as areas of work were contacted.

Psychotherapists were then provided with the inclusion criteria and any other relevant information about the study in an email (see Appendix A). Psychotherapists were asked to inform clients who met the inclusion criteria of the study and to provide them with my contact details or provide potential participants with the attached document (see Appendix B). Potential participants were then welcomed to contact me via the dedicated research phone number or email provided. From this point, the psychotherapists had no further involvement with the study. I recognised that this method of recruitment opens the door to the issue of participant gatekeepers, a situation wherein professionals can influence potential participants (Wiles, 2012). To mitigate this, as participants made contact, their interest and motivation for taking part in the study was explored to ensure there had been no attempts from gatekeepers to influence their choice whether or not to participate.

The first fifteen participants who met the criteria for inclusion in the study and agreed to the approach and practicalities of the study were welcomed for participation. The following is a list of the participant numbers and corresponding pseudonyms.



Participant Number	Pseudonym	Participant Number	Pseudonym	Participant Number	Pseudonym
1.	Colm	6.	Kelly	11.	Áine
2.	Steven	7.	Nadine	12.	Barbara
3.	Aoife	8.	Ben	13.	Andrew
4.	Peter	9.	Valerie	14.	Dearbhla
5.	Dawn	10.	Grace	15.	Lily

### ***Data Gathering Methods***

In his approach to phenomenological inquiry, Van Manen outlines several methods of data gathering, five of which were deemed suitable for this study:

1. Using personal experience as a starting point
2. Tracing Etymological Sources
3. Searching Idiomatic Phrases
4. Locating Experiential Descriptions in literature, art, etc.
5. Obtaining Experiential Descriptions from Others

(Van Manen, 1984, p.42)

These stages further clarify the depth of reflection Van Manen deems necessary to uncover an experience. The researcher should begin by reflecting on their own understanding of the phenomenon, in this case neglect, and consider any biases or assumptions they may have around it. This is further addressed in this chapter's section on researcher reflexivity. The researcher should also delve deeply into the language or etymology of neglect and its history, as well as the understanding of neglect from idiomatic and cultural perspectives. Finally, Van Manen suggests the researcher "borrow" experiences from others to achieve a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (2016, p.62).

In gathering data for this study, I engaged in each of the five means of data collection outlined above; beginning with a reflection on my own professional and personal lived experience in relation to the phenomenon of neglect through clinical and academic supervision and in conducting a reflexive interview with my supervisors, before next exploring the development of the concept of neglect over time and history, considering the modern and figurative definitions of neglect, and uncovering perspectives on neglect in literature and art. These methods of data collection were conducted in the initial stages of the research process, with references to neglect uncovered in the works of Charles Dickens (1881) and Carl Jung (1995) among others, as quoted in previous chapters. However, the primary method of data collection for this study, and for which priority is granted in this chapter, is through the descriptions and interpretations of others, in individual, semi-structured interviews with adults who had experienced neglect in their childhood home.

**Interviews.** For this study, individual, semi-structured interviews were the chosen method of “obtaining experiential descriptions from others” as they are Van Manen’s preferred method of data gathering (Van Manen, 1984, p.42). Individual interviews were deemed most appropriate due to the sensitive nature of the topic of childhood neglect (Finkelhor & Lannen, 2015). An interview schedule (see Appendix C) was developed and a semi-structured interview style was also proposed, as it “allows...a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of the participants’ responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise” (Smith, 2008, p.57). In considering Van Manen’s flexible and ambiguous approach to data gathering, a semi-structured format allows participants freedom to tell their story and allows the researcher greater freedom to explore aspects of the conversation in depth, while also ensuring that the researcher adheres to the aims of the study. In this way, in line with Heideggerian phenomenology, the researcher

privileges the “play of the conversation”, while also ensuring that the interview is “about something” (Smythe et al., 2008, p.1392).

**Interview Preparation.** In preparation for participant interviews, I conducted a pilot interview with a colleague who met the inclusion criteria, participated in a reflexive interview with the study supervisors, and requested feedback from the first interview participant once the study began. The feedback and outcomes from these preparations served the interviews as they progressed and granted me valuable insights into their relationship with the topic of neglect and those who have experienced it. For example, following the pilot interview, I received feedback from the participant regarding the style and general approach taken. The pilot interviewee stated that the general demeanour of the interviewer was appropriate and comfortable. They also commented that the pacing and choice of questions were helpful in keeping the interview on track without being intrusive or leading. Most informative, however, was the feedback regarding the interviewer’s approach. The interviewee commented, “I would have felt quite emotional actually, throughout, and I think part of you was probably trying to protect me a little bit” (Pilot Interview Feedback, p.1). This feedback was similar to feedback received during the reflexive interview conducted with the study supervisors. During the course of the reflexive interview, it became clear that I assumed that those who have experienced neglect are left lacking or wanting in some way or another as their life progresses. Consequently, in my professional role as a therapist with those who have experienced neglect, I can find myself leaning in to address the area that appears lacking, e.g. affection, education, hygiene etc. This revelation paralleled the issue of protecting the interviewee that emerged in the pilot interview. Concerns were addressed regarding the possibility that I could attempt to lean in, support or overprotect the interviewee from upset. With the study supervisors, I discussed means by which to prevent this eventuality, including regular academic supervision, regular clinical supervision, different seating arrangements to

the usual therapy setup and participation in phenomenological forums to ensure proper adherence to the chosen method. This insight was incredibly helpful going forward in the interview process and, thus, became a conscious consideration of mine throughout each of the fifteen interviews.

### ***Data Analysis***

Van Manen's analytical approach involves a specific form of thematic analysis. Unlike the structured, clustering approach of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009), Van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry considers itself more of an "attitude" than a method and encourages the researcher to "push off method for method's sake, to push off sureness to become unsure, to resist conceptual analysis with the view to explain" (Bergum, 1991, p.61). The researcher must immerse themselves in the data and engage with the text descriptively, interpretively, linguistically and reflexively. Below are four stages of this analysis or "phenomenological reflection", as Van Manen terms it (1984, p.59), which were applied to the borrowed data in this study on people's experiences of childhood neglect.

**Uncovering thematic aspects in lifeworld descriptions.** Van Manen describes themes as "the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through. It is by the light of these themes that we can navigate and explore such universes" (1984, p. 59). Therefore, Van Manen does not organise themes into categories or concepts, but attempts to uncover themes as aspects of an experience. Only when the uncovered aspects come together can the universe of the experience be observed. Within this stage of analysis, the researcher is aiming to achieve an understanding of what makes up the experience, rather than quickly categorising the information in the transcripts.

**Isolating thematic statements.** In this stage of the analysis, it is time to become immersed in the data. From a practical standpoint, there are two means of isolating thematic aspects using Van Manen's approach, namely, "the highlighting approach" or the "line-by-line approach" (1984, p.60). In the highlighting approach, the researcher reads and re-reads the transcript several times to determine which phrases best articulate the experience, in this case, the experience of being neglected in childhood. In contrast, the line-by-line approach encourages the researcher to pause at every line in the transcript and ask, "what does this sentence or statement reveal about the experience being described?" (1984, p.61). Through this approach, the researcher can notice recurring themes emerging in the data. Once these have been uncovered, the researcher chooses particular statements from the transcript that best represent the experience of the participant. In considering these two approaches, Van Manen does not favour one over the other but offers both as a means of analysis. In analysing the data from this study, I applied both approaches as the data warranted the consideration of line-by-line analysis, while evocative and insightful phrases were also scattered throughout the interviews and appeared to demand inclusion and emphasis in the findings. Examples of data analysis can be found in the appendices (see Appendix D and Appendix E).

**Composing linguistic transformations.** This stage involves taking the phrases that have been found within the text and using them as the basis for "phenomenologically sensitive paragraphs" (Van Manen, 1984, p.61). This involves making notes and writing paragraphs based on the participants' phrases as well as the information uncovered in the additional methods of data gathering, including researcher personal reflection and etymological and idiomatic data on neglect. As explained in the methodology, language is a central concern in this approach to hermeneutic phenomenology, with Van Manen placing particular emphasis on the language that has developed from the participant's life-world, as outlined in the previous section on hermeneutic phenomenology. Therefore, a balance is

sought between the original linguistic description of the experience as articulated and interpreted by the participant, and the interpretation formulated by the researcher through the writing of paragraphs. In this study, linguistic transformations took the form of memos and stories, which I developed around the themes in order to gain greater insight and further interpret the phenomenon (see Appendix F).

**Determining essential themes.** At this stage of analysis, the researcher reflects on the transcripts, phrases and paragraphs that have been uncovered thus far and attempts to reveal the essential themes that make up the phenomenological universe of the experience. Van Manen (1984) suggests considering themes through the lens of four “lifeworld existentials”: “lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived relation” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p.14). At this stage the researcher engages most effectively in the “hermeneutic circle”, engaging interpretively with the data at the smallest level of the word or phrase, and at the largest level of the whole text (Bergum, 1991, p.66), while always aiming to stay true to the original description of the participant. This stage can often involve reworking, renaming or abandoning certain themes in favour of those which may better serve the experience. The researcher is encouraged at this point to draw from phenomenological texts and texts on the topic to support the process. For this study on adults’ lived experiences of childhood neglect, this stage of rumination was key in ascertaining the thematic aspects which best evoked the experience of neglect, as described and interpreted by the participants, and further interpreted and understood by the researcher.

### ***Writing***

Writing is an integral aspect of Van Manen’s approach to phenomenological inquiry. Van Manen argues that the activity of writing is a physical and psychological process that engages all of our embodied being. In writing throughout the analysis and in the final write

up, the researcher is engaging in “the very activity of doing phenomenology” (Van Manen, 1984, p.68). When writing, the researcher aims to be in a reflective, responsive and interpretive space. This is an iterative process and writing and re-writing is expected and encouraged. For Van Manen, writing is not merely the articulation of the research outcomes, it is an integral part of the research process. In this study, I found writing to be very much an iterative and visceral process which I applied in order to reflect and ruminate on the experience of neglect, as articulated by the participants, with the aim of getting as close as possible to the experience.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

Researcher reflexivity is given credence within many approaches to hermeneutic phenomenology and is central to Van Manen’s approach. Reflection on the part of the researcher is deemed vital to the research process from the very beginning, before participant engagement, during the interview process, within the analysis, and throughout the write up. In order to fully commit to the hermeneutic phenomenological process, researcher reflexivity must flow like a golden thread through each stage of the research process, as the reflective process seeks to ensure limited impact on the participants’ contributions. According to Van Manen, “it is to the extent that *my* experiences could be *our* experiences that the phenomenologist wants to be reflectively aware of this” (1984, p.52).

As a practicing psychotherapist who works with children who have experienced neglect, I continuously reflected on my own experiences, both professionally and personally, from the beginning to the end of this process and, in line with Van Manen’s approach, my experiences were considered a valuable contribution to the study. In this way, my background, skills and engagement with the topic from the perspective of my life-world served the study once I maintained consistent awareness and reflection through supervision,

peer group support, a reflexive interview, memo-taking, journaling and personal therapy. In this study, my reflections on the process can be found in the introduction, in the methodology, particularly concerning interview preparation, and then in the conclusion. This arrangement is to best ensure that the reflexive process is conveyed, while also ensuring that the story and the evocative nature of the study is not disturbed.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study followed the “ethics as process” model, which posits that new ethical issues can emerge as a study progresses, therefore ethics must be continuously reviewed as the study unfolds (Ramcharan & Cutcliffe, 2001, p.358). The ethical principles of “respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice”, in accordance with Beauchamp and Childress (2013), formed the ethical foundation of this study into the experience of neglect in childhood and persisted throughout. These are addressed here in order:

#### ***Respect for Autonomy***

In order to adhere to this principle, I provided an initial explanation of the study to every potential participant during the initial phone contact to ensure that potential participants fully understood the research topic, criteria for participation, gatekeeper concerns, and interview protocols. This was to ensure that every participant fully understood the study and the plan for their involvement, meaning they could provide fully informed written consent at interview. Before beginning the interview, I presented a plain language statement (see Appendix G) and accessible consent form (see Appendix H) to each participant to further ensure autonomous participation.



## *Non-Maleficence*

The principle of non-maleficence encompasses the rights of anonymity and confidentiality for the participants. In the case of this study, the participants' contact information and any other identifying factors have been stored separately to the transcripts and process notes and all audio and documents will be destroyed when no longer in use. Going forward, only the researcher, supervisors and, if deemed necessary, external examiners will have access to the data. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the research process and participants were made aware from the initial phone contact that they could choose for any information contained in the transcripts to be removed at any point up to analysis. However, I also made participants aware of the limits of confidentiality and my role as a mandated reporter as per the Children First Act (2015), concerning disclosures of abuse or neglect.

Particular to this study was the concern regarding participant vulnerability. The topic of neglect could be a difficult discussion point that had the potential to cause distress. In accordance with the DCU ethical guidelines, the participants in this study were deemed vulnerable due to their experience of abuse in childhood. Participants were also considered vulnerable due to the rules around mandated reporting, wherein the researcher must report any previously undisclosed abuse, including neglect, to Tusla. Additionally, some participants may have had mental health difficulties due to the neglect and are, therefore, also categorised as vulnerable. Due to the three vulnerabilities listed above, there was concern that this population could experience some distress when talking about the neglect that they experienced in childhood. In light of this, I fully briefed each participant on the topic of the study during the initial phone contact and at interview stage, while also explaining their right to withdraw at any point. Furthermore, a plan was also put in place that, should a participant become upset during an interview, I would stop the interview and only continue if the participant felt able to do so. This did not occur during any of the fifteen interviews in this

study, but each participant was made aware of this consideration before the interview commence and a debriefing session was available with DCU's Healthy Living Centre, should any of the participants have required it (see Appendix I). In this regard, the ethical principle of non-maleficence was also adhered to through my background and training as a psychotherapist. I have been working therapeutically with children and adults who have experienced maltreatment for the past few years. This awareness and professional training background was available as a support should participants have experienced any emotional upset during the interview process. While several participants expressed emotion during the interviews, this did not appear to cause any undue harm.

### ***Beneficence***

“Beneficence refers to an action done to benefit others” (Beauchamp & Childress, 2013, p.166). Whilst, for the participants, there are no immediate or direct benefits to participating in this study, there are two potential, indirect benefits. Firstly, the study could serve to directly affect the participants in a positive manner. Often those who disclose maltreatment do not feel they are being heard (McElvaney & Lalor, 2014). Furthermore, research in child maltreatment has heard the voices of those who have experience other forms of child abuse but the voices of those who have been neglected have been limited. This study will hopefully allow the participants to feel heard in adulthood regarding their experiences of neglect in childhood. Secondly, by engaging in the study, participants may provide an indirect benefit to a wider community, namely, others who have experienced neglect in the past or are experiencing it now, as well as the professionals who seek to help and support them.

## ***Justice***

The ethical principle of justice was adhered to in this study by ensuring that the process of gatekeeping was avoided in the selection of potential participants. This was achieved through directly addressing this concern with the psychotherapists through which participants were sought, as well as discussing this with the potential participants during the initial phone contact with the aim of promoting equity among potential participants and freedom to engage with the study or choose not to of their own accord. Justice was further addressed within each interview through the privileging of the individual's experience. As is encouraged via the chosen method, the voice of each individual is granted equal opportunity and status within the research findings in the hope of doing justice to each participant's experience of childhood neglect.

## **Research Rigour**

Establishing the rigour of a qualitative study can be a difficult task. Yardley (2000) argues that this is due to the diverse array of approaches within the field of qualitative inquiry and the lack of any agreed structure regarding analysis or procedural activities across these approaches. Therefore, to assess the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, such as this, Yardley established four guiding principles: "sensitivity to context; commitment and rigour; transparency and coherence; impact and importance" (2000, p. 215).

### ***Sensitivity to Context***

This principle concerns researcher sensitivity to the life-worlds of the participants and respect for their subjective experiences. Van Manen (2016) encourages the researcher to return to the voice of the participants throughout the study to get as close as is possible to the experience itself in the context of the participants' life-worlds. Therefore, in this hermeneutic

phenomenological study, I sought not only to achieve sensitivity to context, but to ensure that context was a key consideration throughout interview, analysis and write up.

### ***Commitment and Rigour***

Specific examples of commitment and rigour in this study include commitment to academic supervision. Regular engagement with supervisors throughout the process supported the emergence of key themes and the progression of data analysis, thus showcasing my commitment to the method and the study overall. Additionally, pilot interviews and feedback, engagement with hermeneutic phenomenological researchers and forums, reviewing ethical considerations and being fully present and open during the interview process all contributed to the ethical rigour evident throughout the study process.

### ***Transparency and Coherence***

Transparency was sought through establishing and consistently updating a clear timeline for the research process, as well as an audit trail to track research progress. Regular engagement with supervisors encouraged further transparency. Transparency of the study aim and objectives was also prioritised during the recruitment phase to ensure informed consent from participants. Coherence was particularly important during the final write up, wherein the researcher aimed to strike a comfortable balance between the poetic nature of the hermeneutic phenomenological style and the need for clarity and coherence for the reader.

### ***Impact and Importance***

Impact and importance were considered early on through the identification of gaps in the literature, as this study aimed to contribute to the knowledge base around experiences of childhood neglect. With the conclusion of this study, the impact and importance of the study will be evident through the sharing the knowledge acquired through the publishing of journal

articles, presentations at conferences and the facilitation of professional training and workshops. As is required from a doctoral thesis, the outcomes of this research contribute new knowledge and provide an original contribution to the field of childhood neglect.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has endeavoured to effectively outline the chosen methodology for this study, the specific methods employed in its application and the consideration given to ethical issues and research rigour. I am aware that a variety of qualitative methodologies could have supported a study on adults' experiences of neglect in childhood. However, in considering the experience of what it is really like to have been neglected as a child, I determined that Van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenology would provide the most appropriate and effective means of uncovering, conveying and honouring this experience through description, interpretation and artistry.

## Chapter 4. Findings

Will I get into my story, or what?...

(Andrew, p.1)

### Introduction

In this chapter, the phenomenon of childhood neglect is understood through the common lived experiences of *Being Unloved*, *Being Inferior*, *Seesawing*, *Soldiering* and *Yearning to Escape*. While these common lived experiences evoke essential aspects of the experience of neglect, fifteen adults candidly voiced what it is really like to experience neglect in childhood and it is within their individual stories that the experience of neglect can really be understood. Within each of their stories, we see how pervasive and enduring the experience of neglect has been and, for this reason, each participant's story will be granted a dedicated space within this chapter. Their story will feature within the common lived experience which best conveys their experience of neglect.

Along the journey of this study, it became increasingly apparent that particular consideration needed to be given to the remnants of the experience of childhood neglect in adulthood. *The Lingering Legacy of Neglect* explores the evolution of the five common lived experiences of neglect as the participants grew into adulthood and as they exist today. Finally, an interpretive summary entitled *Journeying Through Neglect* concludes this chapter, illuminating how the common lived experiences of neglect are distinct, yet intertwined, phenomena within the universe of the experience of neglect.

## **Being Unloved**

The lived experience of *being unloved* is positioned at the beginning of this chapter as it sits at the core of many of the participants' experiences of being neglected as children. It is important to distinguish that being unloved is not necessarily about *being* unloved. Rather, it is the lived experience of being unloved, in that the experience for the participants, as children, was of being unloved regardless of the intention of their parents. For many of them, there was an understanding in childhood and still today that the sense of being unloved which they experienced was not a deliberate intention on the part of their parents, but borne of their parents lack of awareness or capacity: "my mum would try to love us" (Grace, p10.), "she just didn't know how to love" (Dearbhla, p.17). Of the fifteen participants, Colm, Ben and Lily's stories of neglect best capture this experience, and evoke the pervasive, devastating experience of being unloved. Most intriguingly, even in the moments of what could be termed abuse, it was the lack of love which was the most difficult part of the experience, according to these participants. For each of them, being unloved was not a transitory feeling, it was their consistent, lived experience of neglect as children.

### ***Stories of Being Unloved***

#### ***Colm***

(Neglect is) the lack of love. (p.25)

Colm is in his early 40s. For Colm, neglect featured in his childhood as aloneness and a sense of being unwanted. He spent a lot of time left alone in his rural home, watching tv and stealing jam from the cupboard while everyone else went out for hours at a time. The

time spent alone without affection or attention led Colm to experience a deep sense of being unloved and unwanted by his parents.

Never feeling held. I have one memory of my grandmother sitting me on her knee and hugging me...d'ya know what I mean? Now that to me was important 'cause that had never happened. (p.22)

For Colm, physical abuse was the only real form of attention he received. In ways, it was almost a relief from the aloneness and easier to bear than the enduring sense that he was unloved.

There was no problem getting a beating but there was no love shown or...kind of warmth, there was never warmth shown, even when you were sick it was "you're fucking sick and here's some rice". (p.22)

On entering his teenage years, Colm got a job, then another job and left the family home as soon as he could. From his perspective, it was not as if anyone was begging him to stay.

As you get older, they were happy for you to leave, d'ya know? They were happy for me to be gone...no, "come back, stay". I could go off and be wherever I wanted to be and there'd be no hassle about it...that was it. You know you're not wanted. (p.9)



Throughout his childhood Colm was always provided with food, clothing and shelter but he was deprived of love. To him, this is the worst form of neglect.

### ***Ben***

It (neglect) was never material things...If you don't have that attachment with your parents...you're constantly questioning yourself and you're always looking for somebody else's approval instead of just trying to enjoy your childhood. (p.14)

Ben is 42 years old. He grew up in a rural area and was the only boy in his home. In his childhood, Ben experienced neglect as a lack of love from his parents. He said this neglect was evident in their lack of acceptance for who he was and what he experienced, valued and cared about. Ben was expected to spend long hours outdoors doing hard labour, and, no matter what he did, Ben's experience was that what he did and who he was were never good enough. This lack of love and acceptance led Ben to constantly seek love and approval and question what it was about him that made him unlovable.

Is there something wrong with me? (p.14)

As a teenager, one incident proved to Ben that his sense of being unloved throughout his childhood was accurate and that he was, in fact, unloved by his parents. Following his engagement in behaviour that his parents did not approve of, Ben's parents chose to empty

his bedroom of all his belongings, including cassette tapes, posters and clothes, and paint the walls a stark white. He never saw his stuff again.

I was only 16. There was a lovely fresh smell of paint inside the house and I comes down and I opens the door and next thing the two of them go “isn’t your room beautiful?” or whatever and I just looked and every part of me that I was or wasn't, good, bad or indifferent, was just gone. It was awful. I'm actually surprised that I haven't got upset now because I always get upset when I think of that feeling because I walked into the house and I thought, my god, anything that I am, whatever I am or I'm not, I'm not what they want me to be so....I can't be what they want me to be. And now anything that I like or I want to be is now in a black bag in the bin or in the fire but it's gone somewhere anyway and I've never seen it since. Total rejection. (p.23)

This incident is just one example of many in which Ben experienced being unloved by his parents. Similar to Colm, although Ben was not neglected in any physical way, the emotional neglect he experienced has left an enduring and devastating legacy.

### *Lily*

I didn't care about being dirty or starving, all I wanted was to be told I was loved. (p.36)

Lily is 41 years old and works as a care worker in a support service. When she was young, Lily’s mother left the home and took two of Lily’s siblings with her, leaving Lily and

her younger brother behind. Lily's father was an alcoholic and violence was part of the fabric of their home.

He didn't care about us. He didn't care about us. He didn't. He didn't because I never heard "I love you", we never got a hug when we cried, when he battered us there was never "I'm sorry". (p.7)

Lily quickly took on the role of mother and carer to her brother and her father, cooking, cleaning, saving money and collecting food vouchers. For Lily, the pain of the hunger and cold she endured through neglect paled in comparison to the pain of being uncared for by her father and unwanted by her mother.

I can remember it as plain as day. I'm looking around at everybody's house in darkness and I'm thinking, they're all in there in bed asleep. I would love to be there. I would love to be there. But I'm sitting here in the bus shelter, terrified, because the person who is supposed to mind me (dad) is unconscious probably from drink and I'm just back from my mom's, who wouldn't take me in. (p.10)

Lily began taking tablets in her teens as a way of escaping this experience and ending up in addiction. Now sober and working in a helping profession, she reflects back on her experience of being unloved with a sad clarity.

I know my dad came from a horrible background himself. He didn't know how to parent. He didn't know what it was to give love. (p.34)

### ***The Meaning of Being Unloved***

Lily, Colm and Ben's evocative words showcase their experience of being unloved throughout their childhoods and adolescence. Through immersion in their stories and the stories of the other participants, differing aspects of the experience of being unloved were uncovered. Within their experiences of being unloved, there emerges three distinct shades of this common human experience: a sense of *being unwanted*, *being uncared for* and *yearning for love*. Every participant in this study experienced at least one of these elements within the experience of being unloved during their childhood.

For Ben and Colm, the sense of being unwanted was evidenced in different ways and the actions of their parents appeared both intentional and unintentional, but for them, the lived experience was the same, a sense of being unwanted, which was intrinsically understood as being unloved. Another participant, Dawn, referred to the lack of love being unintentional on the part of her parents but it being her experience, nonetheless.

I felt very much unwanted as well and the place where I was wanted I knew wasn't right, like around abuse, and I knew that wasn't right and I didn't want it there but I felt very unwanted at home and I knew that probably wasn't what they meant or anything but that was the way I felt. (Dawn, p.19)

For many participants, including Lily, the experience of being uncared for stemmed from a lack of physical and emotional connection from their parents. This lack of care was evident to them through a series of individual, repetitive experiences that cumulated over time. Unlike Colm and Ben, Nadine knew she was wanted by her parents, but she did not experience being cared for as she cleaned up after her mother's suicide attempt.

She would tell you "I love you" and it's like "yeah, but now I'm cleaning your blood up", you know? So, I'm not sure what this is. It's not love. (Nadine, p.15)

Like Nadine, every other participant experienced being uncared for in some way, be it physically, educationally, medically, supervisory or emotionally. For every participant, their parents' attention was consumed by a seemingly bigger issue. These issues included mental illness, addiction and poverty. But regardless of the type of care being withheld or its source, the chronic, enduring lack of care burrowed down into these participants' experiences and left them with a deep sense of being unloved.

Coming from a place of being unwanted and uncared for, several participants spoke of a yearning for love, a striving to attain some affection, attention or connection. They would take on other people's burdens, engage in inappropriate and dangerous relationships and they would often return to the original place of unlove in search of it, hoping that their love would be reciprocated this time.

I would be left to my own devices a lot and how it affected me is that I started looking for love everywhere. Even as a very young child I had a very dysfunctional way of

looking at love and I kind of craved attention from boys...I didn't feel good enough. I was quite shy and if somebody showed me any kind of affection or attention, I was all over it. (Nadine, p.17)

The worst thing in the world is to cry for your mom or dad knowing they were going to hurt you, but you still cried because you wanted them. It's a yearning. It's a yearning. You're going to go for it. You know it's going to hurt but you're still going to go in because you know no different. (Kelly, p.23)

In an attempt to experience love, Lily, Dearbhla and Steven resorted to tactics or manoeuvres in the prospect of getting love. Lily continued to return to her father for love, Dearbhla would leave in the hope of being missed and Steven would attempt to meet his mother's needs so that she would meet his in return.

I used often go off (in the dark at night) in the hope that they would miss me and come after me. I used always try that, but I'd be gone forever and they would just be drinking. They never did. (Dearbhla, p.5)

That's how I took it at the time. You're not really important enough for me to listen to you. What you say isn't important enough for me to take on here. So I just thought, right, how do I get to talk to you? How do I get your attention?... Is it by talking about your stuff? Then I'd get in that way...make her feel like she's being heard. (Steven, p.12)

For many of the participants, being unloved was the most detrimental experience within the overall phenomenon of neglect. The enduring sense that they were unloved evolved from a lack of care and a sense of being unwanted in the family home. For some, this led them to seek out love in other places, leading to some dangerous and unfortunate situations for several participants. In this way, the sense of being unloved started a chain reaction of experiences that will be explored further in this chapter. In particular, beginning from a core lived experience of being unloved in the family home, the participants in this study moved out into the wider world and experienced a sense of being inferior. From their lived experience, the participants' understanding appears to have been that if you are not loved in your own home by your own family, you must therefore be unworthy of receiving love from anyone and everyone else.

### **Being Inferior**

For the participants in this study, a sense of being inferior was experienced by them as children in two distinct ways; as an internal sense of who they are within themselves, and as an external experience of their place in the world. In this way, being inferior can be interpreted as the internalised experience of *being not good enough* and the externalised experience of *being less than* their friends, neighbours, relatives and society at large. All of the interviewees in this study remarked on some aspect of inferiority, but it was particularly evident for Dearbhla, Peter and Barbara.

## *Stories of Being Inferior*

### *Dearbhla*

The richer kids would often say “we're not allowed. We like you but we're not allowed be seen with you.” (p.10)

Dearbhla is 50 years old. When she was a child, Dearbhla’s parents spent a lot of time in the pub. As she grew up, she spent her evenings and nights sitting in the pub or wandering around her town, hoping that one of her parents would come looking for her. Neither ever did. The sense of loneliness and lack of affection as a child caused Dearbhla a lot of pain. In school and in her community, she was aware that she was different to the other children in what she had and how her parents behaved. She felt a sense of shame and grew to believe that she was inferior and unworthy of her peers. This was compounded by comments made by her friends and her teachers.

Our school was very class distinctive. You would feel that. I felt a lot of shame and a lot of really deep feelings of not being good enough and the school would compound that then as well. If you were from a poor background, they had no interest in you. When I was in school there was a few of us coming from similar backgrounds and there was one particular nun who used to always say “you can sit down the back and do whatever you want because”, she used to always say the same thing, “where you are going you don't need an education. You're going to end up on the dole, unmarried mothers, never travel, never do anything with your life so you might as well go down the back”. I remember thinking “that sounds about right”. (p.7)



For Dearbhla, the message of her inferiority was coming from so many external sources, including school, her peer group, her parents and her environment, that she quickly internalised this as a core sense of being inferior. As she grew into adulthood, addiction took hold. Now sober and working in the mental health services, Dearbhla says she struggles with anxiety and can find it hard to promote herself professionally. Personally, she says she worries about not being good enough for a potential partner and she continues to battle with the ingrained, negative views she holds about herself.

### ***Peter***

The deep shame, I think. It's the deep shame. (p.28)

Peter is in his 30s. He is the oldest of several siblings and he grew up in a council house. For Peter, neglect was very much a material, physical experience. It was sitting in school and watching other kids take out their lunches, not having underwear and wearing ill-fitting hand-me-downs. He says this was embarrassing and made him feel like an outsider.

I knew the level of poverty that we were experiencing, even though there would have been others, it was much different, and it was quite apparent to people at lunchtime with sandwiches and stuff like that. Like we used to get sandwiches with ketchup inside *\*pulls a face*. (p.10)

For Peter, neglect was born out of poverty, going hungry as there wasn't enough food in the house, watching other families go on trips when his family never did. Special occasions, like Christmas, clearly indicated to Peter that his experience was something to hide and be ashamed of.

I can remember only one Christmas getting something from my parents for Christmas, the rest of the toys or something would come from my dad's side. We would go down there Christmas Day. My dad was obviously extremely embarrassed because he would have us at the top by the gate before we'd go into my uncles, practicing what we did get and we'd be not after getting it. So, you'd have to rehearse it before you went down so that when my uncle would ask me what I got I would say "a snooker table". "Oh you'll have great fun with that". There would have been no snooker table...It was embarrassing 'cause I remember going back to school and the teacher'd ask you what you got and you'd be kind of making it up. (p.7)

The shame of the sandwiches and the shame of the lack of Christmas presents led Peter to understand that his family was inferior to others. This sense of inferiority was compounded by comments made by peers and neighbours about Peter's parents, their background and their culture.

With mum and dad both not working, Peter got to spend time with them. He felt loved by them but he also knew they were struggling. They often needed his help in a crisis, caring for them in incidents of violence or self-harm. Peter described the day-to-day neglect of his childhood as like living in a grey ball: mundane, monotonous, heavy and exhausting. The breaks from the monotony were what keep Peter going – a KitKat from a classmate, playing a friend's Nintendo, a burger and chips. As he grew into adulthood, Peter struggled to fit in

with others and found himself very materialistic, repeatedly buying that which he never had in order to overcome a deep sense of inferiority. Over time, Peter established himself professionally and remains shocked even now that he is taken seriously, accepted and respected as a professional in his office.

### ***Barbara***

That's kind of how I used to feel, not good enough to be around. (p.6)

Barbara is 46. She moved around a lot as a child. So much so that the lack of routine in her home life was the routine. As the perpetual new kid in school, Barbara was cast as the outsider. A lack of food, material items and no permanent home led Barbara to feel that she was inferior or less worthy than others. This was made obvious during the times she would stay with relatives. Although it appeared unintentional on the part of her relatives, Barbara's understanding from a young age was that she was inferior to them, beneath them, both literally and figuratively.

My mom's family were around a lot and we'd meet them a lot and I always felt kind of out of place around them. My mom's parents, they were upper class. They lived in an old Georgian house and I remember we had to stay with them for a few months down in the basement, the servants' quarters. But it wasn't a servants' quarter. You know what I mean? Like when you see Downton Abbey and you see the houses and down below were the servants' quarters. (p.6)

Barbara's mother struggled with grief when Barbara was a child and Barbara found her mother to be overwhelmed or cold at times. Barbara sought solace in music and animals and, later, alcohol. She says drinking helped her to feel comfortable in her own skin. Barbara says that her upbringing was akin to that of a baby bird being expected to jump out of the nest and follow the mother, while the mother never looked back to see if she was following. In this way, for Barbara, there was a sense that she was unseen, unworthy of being checked on or cared for, unworthy of her mother's attention. Therefore, in Barbara's experience, she was inferior to other children whose mothers cared for them and showed them affection. Today, the sense of inferiority from her childhood has left Barbara with much anxiety that can act as a barrier to engaging socially with others. She is still attempting to learn some basic social skills that are normally taught to children, including how to engage with neighbours, what to say in social settings, or how to reciprocate greetings.

### ***The Meaning of Being Inferior***

For Dearbhla, Peter and Barbara, there is a sense that, as children, being inferior was more than a consistent feeling or understanding. To them it was a fact, an undeniable, lived experience. The sense of inferiority became so ingrained in them as children that, as stated by Dearbhla, they believed themselves that this was true. In the same vein, fellow participants Kelly, Nadine and Valerie all used the word "dirty" (Kelly, p.22) when describing themselves, their families and the environments in which they grew up. Being dirty meant that they were not good enough in their own eyes. This experience led many participants, like Aoife, to seek out ways of proving themselves good enough to warrant their existence.

I did a project on alcohol when I was about 12 or 13 and I took my confirmation pledge until I was 25. Then I was sitting in an AA room at 17 *\*laughing*. I don't know (why I took the pledge), a sense of pride or a sense of worthiness...that if I did something like that that I would be worth something. (Aoife, p.27)

Coming from this sense of being not good enough, the participants, as children, then ventured out into their life-worlds, where the internalised sense of inferiority was mirrored back to them, further ingraining the sense of being inferior as a core lived experience. For Steven and Nadine, being less than others was evident in the clear differences between themselves and those living around them. Akin to Peter's attempts to disguise the reality of his Christmas from his uncle and his teacher, Steven and Nadine chose to hide away and keep secrets so as not to reveal themselves and their families as inferior to others, even though this remained their own experience internally.

I'm going to shelter myself 'cause everyone knows he's an alcoholic (dad). Everyone knows. People would treat you differently and they wouldn't want us to hang around with their kids. So, you're very much seen more and more there as the outsider. (Steven, p.16)

There was ambulances would come to my house...Even the shame of having an ambulance come to the door if she (mum) was after overdosing. Our estate was like a terrace. It's a small terrace and everybody knows everything and they're out to look, so I think I kept it under wraps. (Nadine, p.8)

For Andrew, like Barbara, the sense of being less than came from the experience of being in his relatives' homes.

My mom, she lived in a shitty house in a shitty area. Every single one of her sisters and her mother are from M, N and O (affluent areas). So even from that we were going up there into these flashy houses. Up to the upper classes 'cause we're down. Do you know what I mean? It's kind of imprinted in your brain. From where I can see anyway. First of all, deprived area, traveller site down the road, antisocial behaviour, the Garda station right in the middle, the litter around the place, the horses, the burnt out cars, all of this stuff makes me...it made me feel less than. (Andrew, p. 24)

For many participants, the experience of being inferior both within themselves and in their outer worlds seemed to bring with it a great sense of shame; a shame of who they were as human beings, a shame of their families and a shame of where they came from. This shame of believing you are inferior, not good enough, less than, seems to have left a mark - a *dirty* mark, to use the words of some participants - a mark that can never be fully cleaned. Thus, being inferior, for the participants in this study, can be understood as a pervading and enduring experience within the pervading and enduring phenomenon of childhood neglect.

### **Seesawing**

Seesawing is the third phenomenon uncovered in this study on adults' experiences of childhood neglect. It reflects the interviewees' experiences of the environments in which they existed as children, as well as their relationships, which were unstable, off balance and

confusing. A seesawing existence, which developed from these insecure, unbalanced environments and relationships, became the norm for many participants as children and led them to exhibit polarised and extreme behaviours themselves as they engaged with their seesawing life-worlds. Within this phenomenon of seesawing, the lived experiences of the participants can be further interpreted as *a sense of ambivalence* and *a sense of unbalance*, which are best captured in the stories of Áine, Grace and Valerie.

### *Stories of Seesawing*

#### *Áine*

In our family...you'd feel the pressure rising like a pressure cooker and then there'd be some kind of an explosion and then we'd all go *\*sighs and relaxes* and we'd all be ok then after it and that would be the norm and then it would all build up again over something really small *\*sits upright and tense*. (p.3)

Áine is 47. Growing up, Áine never wanted for food, material items, education, medical care, or other necessities synonymous with neglect. For Áine, neglect was present in the lack of consistent emotional support from her parents. Her father's alcoholism, temperament and vested interest in matters outside the home led to a sporadic, unpredictable emotional connection between he and Áine. Within the home, the lack of consistency was evident in the regular build up to chaotic incidents and the honeymoon period that would follow. According to Áine, living like this was like riding on the crest of a wave, rising up and then crashing to the shore, always up and down, never steady and balanced. To Áine, this seesaw-like reality became the norm.

Like a wave because it became so normal. It's just that was the way it was. We would be all fine and then somebody would say something and then the shouting would start, "what did you mean by that?" "I didn't mean anything by that!" And then there would be doors slamming, that kind of thing. (p.5)

As a teen, Áine found herself rejecting her parents and turning to her friends and, later, alcohol as a means of getting respite from the up and down reality of her home life. She spiralled into addiction and found herself seesawing for many years, back and forth, between home and travel, alcohol and sobriety, career changes and other life choices. Now stable, in recovery and progressing in her career, she thinks about her nephews and nieces, thankful for the steady, loving childhoods they are enjoying compared with her own.

### *Grace*

Balance. That's the word. I had no sense of what balance looked like. (Grace, p.30)

Grace is in her early thirties. Her experience of neglect as a child came very much from a difficult relationship with her mother and her mother's challenges in parenting due to mental health issues. As she grew up, Grace witnessed a deterioration in the care and presentation of her home, as well as unboundaried behaviours and an emotional unreliability from her mother that was difficult for her to manage. This deterioration of her environment and her relationship with her mother was confusing for Grace, who, subsequently, internalised this experience and became confused and unsure within herself as to who or what



to be. This led Grace to spend her energy constantly adapting her actions and behaviours in order to gain emotional support and consistent care for herself and her younger siblings.

Everything was always very messy...every decision I was making came from a very messy place without a clarity of what I was feeling, what I thought I should do, what I want to do, what would get me attention, what would keep me away from attention, what would keep me safe, what would be good enough, what people wouldn't question, what could be too far. That's the kind of dance that would have been massively different if there was no neglect. So even just simple balance. I would have been able to come from myself to make decisions but that isn't where my decisions were coming from. It was totally out of balance. That's it. (Grace, p.31)

As a teen, Grace struggled to find balance. She took on jobs with long hours and overworked herself. Even in adulthood, Grace admits she has found it hard to achieve balance in her professional and personal life. In her twenties, she dove intensely into relationships and then ended them soon after. She overworks herself and then crashes. She worries that she will let others down, that she is not good enough and she doesn't work hard enough. Now in her thirties, Grace is challenging these thoughts about herself, but the pain of neglect and the grief for what she went without is still palpable. She is aware of how the emotional neglect and inconsistency she experienced as a child has moulded her perception of relationships, but she is passionate about maintaining a healthy balance in the committed relationship she now enjoys.

## *Valerie*

When you hear of balance, I think you *can* have a middle but sometimes life makes it all or nothing, not just down to our own part. Yeah, there's always a sway. (p.25)

Valerie is 37. Growing up, Valerie would describe her childhood as akin to ‘The Snapper’. Dramatic altercations between Valerie’s parents were a regular fixture in the family routine, while the nourishing emotional connection she craved wasn’t regularly available. In this way, Valerie says neglect existed for her in two ways: consistently, in the lack of emotional connection between her and her parents, and sporadically, in the moments during which her parents would fight and she would be sitting in the dark upstairs, waiting for it to end, uncared for and unnoticed. Confusion and ambivalence were also present for Valerie in her parents’ polar messages about life, acceptable behaviour and values. Their opposing perspectives on even the smallest of issues, such as greeting the neighbours, left Valerie seesawing between constantly opposing messages, struggling to divert back and forth.

My mother never really socialised in the town, but my dad then loved everyone. (He’d say), “say hi to them all, it doesn't matter who it is.” And my mother’s then, “don't look at them!” (p.2)

Valerie sought out many means of escape from the unbalanced, confusing environment she described as her home. She ran around a lot as a child, seeking out thrills and the feeling of freedom. Early into adolescence she developed an eating disorder and other addictions were to follow. Now, in adulthood, Valerie admits that she still finds it hard to

achieve balance in her life, but she has come to accept that full balance is not realistic or attainable.

It's virtually impossible to get a full middle balance. I'm always swinging this way, that way. I'm never fully that or fully this. I'm always swinging and I'm like...have I ever gone like this? *\*shows steady balance with arm.* If I have, I must be like Mother Teresa! (p.24)

### ***The Meaning of Seesawing***

For Áine, Grace and Valerie, the sense of seesawing they experienced and, in ways, continue to experience, is evident in their stories of childhood neglect. Interestingly, this experience of seesawing was also observed within the dialogue of many of the interviews, in the phrasing and linguistic patterns of many of the interviewees' comments. This manifested through a sense of ambivalence, which was evident in the way some interviewees described their childhood experiences. Some participants even made seemingly opposing or contradictory comments within the one breath as they spoke of their childhood of neglect. This can be seen in Colm's description of everything being grand but not grand.

At the time it was absolutely grand! At times, I remember being lonely and...I know then at that age I had a rope for about two years...yeah, like an out. (Colm, p.4)

Colm's commentary on everything being grand but also, during this time, keeping a rope to die by suicide seem like two diametrically opposed experiences. But this type of commentary was found in many of the interviews. Often, the participants would make a remark that seemed contradictory to earlier comments. Kelly, for example, spoke of her parents' neglect of her as horrendous and, in ways, unforgiveable.

It was torture. It's horrendous. There's no call for it whatsoever, no matter how bad things are. It's right up there with murder. It's right up there with murder... There is no excuse for it. None whatsoever. (Kelly, p.18)

However, Kelly later spoke of understanding her parents' limitations.

They just weren't designed to be parents, you know. (Kelly, p.14)

Kelly's consideration for her parents and her anger towards them seems contradictory, but, as is the case for many of the participants, both polarities are equally accurate and true to her lived experience. During the interview, Kelly, like Colm, seesawed back and forth between positions that appear conflicting but both are authentic to her experience. This sense of ambivalence expressed by Colm and Kelly is mirrored in Dearbhla's experience.

There was very few women in the pub, but the ones who were there were real bad in addiction and I might see them passed out and there might be some fella having sex

with them, taking advantage of them. So all that kind of crazy stuff and fighting and madness...I remember it was very boring. (Dearbhla, p.4)

For Dearbhla, the chaos and boredom were both present in her experience of neglect. Dearbhla, Colm and Kelly's experiences of the crazy and boring, grand and unbearable, and anger and acceptance forced them to seesaw between these polarities, with both polarities being equally valid and true to their experience. In this way, the ambivalence expressed by these participants is not a case of right and wrong but a case of two opposing, enduring experiences being equally true given the circumstances of each participant's lived experience. In describing his relationship with his father, Steven poetically articulated the ambivalence that exists within the experience of seesawing.

The pleasure and the pain...The pain almost brings on the pleasure in a way and I guess you could understand how it would get mixed up because everything was like that at home. He was funny, there were a lot of good sides to him interwoven with it. He used to come up to my bedroom and tell me how much he loved me when he was drunk sometimes which he would never do when he was sober and then tell me that he was sorry. I wrote a whole song about that experience, kind of seeing him as the devil in almost a romantic way: "The devil spoke to me last night, he said he's sorry for what he's done, and if he could he'd turn the hands and make good of what went wrong". There's a lot to it.... I still even find myself working on it now...Yeah. I think one line is, "A child always sees the beauty in an old rotten gate" and it was like that, just seeing him rotting away here in front of me and he's still beautiful as well, that's still shining through, as well as the poison. (Steven, p.17)

Steven's experience of seesawing between love and hate, pleasure and pain, devil and father encapsulates the experience of seesawing, in that seesawing does not just refer to the polarised actions and behaviours of the participants and their parents, it is very much a lived experience from a young age, with a sense of confusion and ambivalence persisting in the relationships and environments in which Steven, Kelly, Colm and Dearbhla existed as children.

Curiously, although the sense of seesawing expressed by the participants in discussing their childhoods can sound chaotic and unbalanced, it was experienced in many ways as routine, expected and almost mundane. As explained by Kelly, "the abnormal became the norm" (p.18), the sense of seesawing was the norm, and a sense of confusion and being unbalanced was the expected way of things.

We'd be up and down to psychiatric hospitals a lot, in and out. (Nadine, p.4)

Yeah, but my dad was in and out. He was in and out of jail a lot. (Andrew, p.1)

For Nadine and Andrew, a sense of unbalance was to be expected and became an enduring experience in their lives. Similarly, Lily described the regularity with which her father's behaviour would seesaw back and forth.

His pattern would have been every second day. He would be nice the second day and then the following day he would start again. (Lily, p.4)

This expectation of seesawing in their familial dynamics and in their day-to-day lived experiences was confusing for the participants. Underneath this seesawing normality, the sense of confusion and polarisation burrowed within the individual, no matter how accustomed they became to it. For Aoife and Lily, this led to a lot of questioning and doubting themselves, leaving them seesawing about their very existence.

I think I was quite confused as a child. Even as a teenager I didn't know how to stand my own ground or have my own opinions. (Aoife, p.10)

It was like my head was like a washing machine and I was like Jesus Christ, why did they have me? They don't even want me. He doesn't want me up there because he kills me, she doesn't want me down there because she walked out and left us and now she's sending me back up the road knowing that he is an animal when he drinks. (Lily, p.11)

Neglect can often be identified as a pervasive nothingness. But the reality is very different in the experiences of the participants. The seesawing nature of neglect is such that love, relationship and other needs are given and taken away in a swinging, almost predictable fashion. While it is confusing to have love given and taken, to have parents in and out, to have the family dynamic constantly swinging from extreme to extreme, the abnormality of

seesawing through childhood neglect becomes so familiar that achieving or embracing balance in adulthood has been difficult for many of the participants. In this way, the experience of seesawing and the sense of ambivalence and unbalance through which it manifests is, for these participants, a reliably unreliable way of existing.

## **Soldiering**

*Soldiering* is the fourth common lived experience that has emerged from this study regarding adults' experiences of childhood neglect. For the participants in this study, the experience of soldiering can be interpreted as three, separate yet intertwined, experiences; *being on the frontline, existing in survival mode* and *being a lone soldier*. Through interpretation and analysis, soldiering became one of the most evocative and poignant aspects of neglect to emerge from this study, with every participant alluding to the experience in some way. But for Nadine, Steven and Kelly it appears that soldiering greatly encompasses their experience of neglect.

### ***Stories of Soldiering***

#### ***Nadine***

There was ambulances would come to my house, guards would come to my house... if she (mom) took an overdose, or I'd find her cutting herself with razors quite a lot and I remember cleaning that up. (p.8)



Nadine is in her early 30s. As a child, Nadine grew up in what she describes as a chaotic home. Her mother's mental illness, among other issues, led Nadine to witness violence, self-harm and suicide attempts throughout her childhood.

They'd batter each other sometimes. There wasn't a lot of physical violence between them but, when it went off, it went off. Like, she stuck a knife in him once. She stabbed him in the kitchen and he had to get stitches. (p.4)

As a child, Nadine quickly learned that her parents' focus was on matters bigger than her. This is one of the ways in which Nadine experienced neglect, for, in these moments of chaos and violence, no one was caring for her. For Nadine, the best way to ensure her own survival in this environment was to behave like a soldier, almost like a medic. In battle, the medic's job is to treat the wounded in dangerous situations. Nadine knew that by treating her mother's wounds, both physical and psychological, she stood a better chance of surviving herself.

I'd be the one looking after her. If I came home and she was up in bed or something like that, I'd be going in checking her. Does she want a cup of tea, probably see what needed to be done around the place...I don't know is that the child wanting to survive or what, but I thought, "if she's ok, we're ok. Make sure she's alright!" (p.7)

As a child, Nadine yearned for love and connection and found herself seeking it out by continuing to play the role of a soldier, entering chaotic and dangerous situations that were

not good for her. Nadine turned to self-harm and later tablets to escape the pain of neglect and abuse. Now, as a professional working with similar issues to those she experienced, Nadine notices how she has returned to her childhood survival strategies in work. She prides herself in her ability to withstand the sometimes aggressive, challenging environment of her workplace but she also acknowledges that her position in this environment mirrors the soldier role she took on in childhood.

### *Steven*

It was the tangible feeling of neglect when he was giving out downstairs and I was upstairs listening to it and there was nobody there to care for me in that moment. So, times like that, it's like, who is there to protect me? (p.25)

Steven is a husband and father in his early 30s. Steven learned from an early age that life is a battle in which he needed to protect himself. As a child, Steven experienced neglect as a lack of support or healthy emotional connection with both parents. Steven's mother appeared vacant and dissociated from her children. Similar to Nadine, Steven took on a protective role as a means of gaining some affection from his mother. He describes seeking her out and comforting her during the day and lying awake at night worrying about her. Steven's father's alcoholism led to violence inside and outside the home. Over time, Steven realised that he would have to protect his mother and siblings and challenge his father as the man of the house to ensure safety, prompting Steven to take on an aggressive, alpha male role that he wasn't ready for, akin to a young private in an army.

I've got to make myself...a man so I can protect my family. So I had to get out of this child like state because that's not going to work...there was a manning up to him. I guess there was always that feeling of 'who is the alpha male?' As I grew older, I was thinking "I am the alpha male. I want to be the alpha male. I want to be the guy of the house"... there was a want that stemmed from the "have to be". I remember writing, "I AM THE MAN" in chalk all over our estate. I drew it in big huge letters. (p.13)

Over time, the aggression and anxiety of surviving in his household caused Steven to become physically sick with stress. As a teenager he relied on drugs and alcohol to soothe the anxiety. Now in adulthood, Steven is endeavouring to move past the roles of soldier and protector that he took on as a child. Like a soldier back from war, he is endeavouring to adapt to civilian life and discover his own authentic version of what it is to be a man.

### ***Kelly***

I wasn't out (playing). I was too busy keeping the house, just cleaning it, just doing my best to keep us all above water...It was sink or be sunk you know. You had to do it yourself. (p.13)

Kelly is a busy mum with a big family. Neglect was very much a part of Kelly's day-to-day lived experience growing up. In her home, food and heat were not regular fixtures and when food was available, Kelly often chose not to eat to avoid the pain of hunger that would follow. As a child, Kelly often remained silent and hidden away. She describes this as her tactic for survival back then. If you were silent and unseen, you were somewhat safe.

You know the fight, flight or freeze? Everything is fine when you freeze. So just freeze, freeze, stay still...blend, blend. She won't even know you're there. Blend.

(p.10)

As a child, even the idea of being a person in her own right with basic entitlements was a foreign and confusing notion to Kelly. Like a soldier, Kelly was there to fulfil a purpose in keeping the house running for her family.

I could cook a stew when I was four. I'd light the fire if the coal was there. I could make a dinner out of a potato...I felt that was my job. That's why I was born. That's why I was there and if I wasn't there it wasn't going to get done because there were days when I wasn't able to do it because I was so hungry. I'd be so weak I wasn't able to get up and they were the days that we'd be left there. (p.3)

Kelly's experience of neglect is akin to that of a lone, camouflaged soldier, trying to lay low to avoid detection while also trying to be a good soldier and fulfil their assigned orders. Unlike most other participants, Kelly never ventured into drug use. For Kelly, freedom came primarily in the form of fantasy and imagination. But meeting and marrying her husband was, for Kelly, the greatest freedom. She explained that she had never known what a home was until she created her home with her husband. Seeing the advantages enjoyed by her children is heart-warming but also difficult for Kelly as she reflects back on a

childhood in which she was forced to prematurely take on the roles of mother, provider and protector, roles she still plays today.

### *The Meaning of Soldiering*

For Nadine, Steven and Kelly, the persistent neglect throughout their childhoods prompted them to engage in an experience of soldiering as a means of survival. For many participants, chaotic home environments were at the root of this, establishing a lived sense of being on the frontline of neglect. Like Nadine and Steven, Peter's needs were neglected during dramatic incidents to which he was often on the frontline, a first responder to all too regular crises.

I seen her trying to commit suicide twice. I remember running, we had no phone in the house, running to a payphone at like 4 o'clock in the morning when I was 12 or 13 and just going to the hospital to see her. It was just hard to watch that kind of stuff.

(Peter, p.15)

The violence and self-harm witnessed by Peter and Nadine mirrors the experiences of many other participants including Dearbhla and Andrew, who explained, "I would have seen a lot of things that a little kid should not have seen" (Dearbhla, p.4), and "I'd go down and try and drag him off her and I'd get a fucking clout. I'd get put back up the stairs" (Andrew, p.10). Akin to soldiers in a warzone, many participants existed in a constant state of fear about their own and others' survival. For Dawn and Andrew, this sense of existing in survival mode meant being watchful and vigilant, keeping alert and energised to the sights, sounds

and smells in their turbulent environment. For, if they didn't remain vigilant, no one would do it for them.

I was very much alert, so hypervigilant all the time...I had to keep watching in every direction I felt, you know?...If it starts to get dark, you're watching behind you, is there a monster on the stairs? You're watching for shadows, you're turning up and down the telly because you want the telly for company and then you're afraid if the telly's off you're going to miss something...so I had fierce energy in it I suppose, very vigilant of everything. (Dawn, p.5)

Oh sussing, cagey. You're sussing him (dad) out as soon as he comes in. As I said, it's what mood was he in? What's he after taking? Is he after having a good day? It's kind of like you're on edge. (Andrew, p.18)

Similar to Kelly's experience, other participants spoke of the survival skills necessary to exist in a neglectful life-world, such as cooking, lighting fires and blending into the background as a means of self-protection.

We had a fire and a lot of time there would be no coal, you know, and then sometimes there would be. So I learned to light a fire quite young with very little actually.  
(Dawn, p.3)

For these participants, basic skills were invaluable and key for survival. But, within the overall experience of soldiering, the most popular and widespread approach to surviving childhood neglect was taking on a role. Like a drafted soldier, participants were silently assigned a role in their home, as children, and it was their understanding that it was up to them to make themselves indispensable to the cause, to fulfil that role to the best of their ability. Akin to Nadine and Steven's experiences, Lily took on the carer role as this seemed the best way to ensure survival.

Before he would go to the pub I would say "Dad don't start now today. Don't start now. I'll make a lovely dinner for you when you come home, David will be in from school, I'll light the fire and the place will be nice and cosy when you come back".  
(Lily, p.17)

Even with chaotic incidents, households to maintain, and parents of whom to be vigilant and protective, many participants explained that one of the most pervasive aspects of soldiering concerns the sense of being a lone soldier. For them, experiencing childhood neglect was akin to being alone in battle, alone in the gruelling monotony of a long war. While real soldiers often exist as a band of brothers, soldiering through neglect had a sense of every man for himself, that rather than creating a sense of comradeship, neglect brought with it a sense of aloneness and a focus purely on self-preservation and survival, which was evident to Aoife and Andrew in their sibling relationships.

There's too much going on. I don't think I thought too much about my brother at that time. (Aoife, p.17)

It's like, I'm trying to survive, myself. I'm not taking on board your shit. And I think they (parents) looked at me as the problem child...So whatever spare attention she (mother) had was given to me...So if I was to say anything I would say that my brother and sister felt pushed out by me because I was a little bastard...as long as I was getting some sort of attention it didn't matter off who. I need this! (Andrew, p.21)

As lone soldiers, Aoife and Andrew spoke of the disconnection they experienced in their sibling relationships and several participants further expressed how they believe their experience of neglect was far worse than their siblings. Interestingly, many participants did not mention their siblings at all when discussing their childhoods and, if they did when prompted, it was brief. In this way, many interviewees' approach to discussing their siblings mirrors neglect itself in that the phenomenon exists not in what is there but what is not there; the data can be found in not what is said, but what is unsaid.

In all, the common lived experience of soldiering highlights how the experience of the neglected child, as told by these adult participants, can be viewed as one of a lone soldier, soldiering through childhood, hypervigilant to the dangers around them and picking up the skills necessary for survival along the way. For every participant in this study, this constant soldiering through childhood and adolescence took its toll, leading them to search for any means of escape from the chronic anxiety and drudgery of neglect.



## **Yearning to Escape**

*Yearning to Escape* is another key phenomenon that was uncovered in this study on the experience of childhood neglect. It conveys a longing expressed by every participant, an acknowledgement that the yearning to leave, escape, get out, or be free was a constant underlying lived experience for each of them. Every participant experienced a pressure and sense of being trapped in their neglectful environment, and each turned to both helpful and harmful forms of escape throughout their childhoods. In this regard, yearning to escape can be understood from two perspectives – *being confined* and *yearning to escape*, and can be best understood through the stories of Andrew, Aoife and Dawn.

### ***Stories of Yearning to Escape***

#### ***Andrew***

I have to survive here so I'm going to start using drugs and by Christ, did I use them. They saved me...as soon as I found drugs, I thought “this is it. This is what my life was destined for”. I wanted more. They made me fit in. They made me feel safe. They stopped my head from fucking going crazy. (p.5)

Andrew is in his late 20s. During Andrew’s childhood, his father was in and out of prison, leaving Andrew’s mother at home with three children and no income. For Andrew, neglect existed in a lack of money and material items, as well as a lack of emotional attachment due to his father’s frequent absence and his mother’s mental health difficulties. Throughout his childhood and into his adolescence, Andrew felt a need to escape the pain of

his situation. He became involved with the wrong crowd and started abusing drugs. This lifestyle became Andrew's new, reliable routine.

I used to come downstairs, grab the money, go into the kitchen, grab a cereal bar, out to the shed, grab a nodge (cannabis), over the back wall and I was free. Freedom for the day...I was never in the house. I was always out on the streets. (p.15)

This new existence gave Andrew a sense of importance, friends he could buy with drugs and an escape from his experience of being unimportant, inferior and, ultimately, unloved. Now in recovery and with children of his own, Andrew's goal is to be stable and reliable for his family. This means avoiding drugs, violence and confrontation, parenting effectively, portraying a calm demeanour and providing consistent affection to his children.

### *Aoife*

It was a way of escaping, that's it...off looking at rolling grass and taking mushrooms (p.8)

Aoife is 43 and comes from a middle-class family. Both her parents were alcoholics but also well-educated professionals. Aoife never wanted for food, clothing, shelter, or schooling. In her own words, for Aoife, neglect wasn't *real* neglect. It was needing someone to listen and finding no one there. It was managing the drunken incidents at home and being quiet, not making things worse. For Aoife, neglect was being mum's wing woman, being her shoulder to cry on, or trying to think of an answer when dad came home drunk asking "why

do you love me?" (p.9). For Aoife, neglect consisted of having her emotional needs unmet and understanding that she should hold in her feelings, so they don't add to mum and dad's difficulties. This experience of needing to hold it all in brought with it a sense of confinement that caused Aoife much pain.

Tight (in my chest) and just wanting to kind of release and I did, eventually. Yeah, it was just kind of very tight...too much going on. There's too much to hold onto. (p.17)

This withholding and dampening down of her experience led Aoife to lose connection with herself, with her own opinions and, ultimately, her own voice. Aoife grew to believe she was not worthy of the affection or attention of her parents and the pain of this led her to look for escape in many ways. Throughout her teens, Aoife learned to lean on alcohol and drugs, as well as food, to soothe herself, a brief escape from the sense of confinement and pressure to fit in.

I have a desperate relationship with food as well. It's another addiction as well. It's kind of to dampen down how I feel. (p.21).

As an adult, Aoife is a mum and busy professional. She acknowledges the anger she carries with her from that time and knows that her parents would never view her childhood in the same way she does. Aoife is proud that she is now working hard to unpick her history, to better understand her escape routes and her pain, for the sake of herself and her children.

## *Dawn*

Self-harm as well for me was another thing that happened to me, you know. It was a tool I used to escape from hell... It was like that when I was cutting myself. So, it's this build up of tension, tension, tension. One cut. Blood, and "ahhh" \*sighs. The ease in it.  
(p.17)

With two parents struggling with alcoholism, Dawn was left to her own devices a lot. Neglect was evident for Dawn in the lack of food, money, material items and supervision. She spent a lot of her time in the house alone, looking out the window at the other children playing. She felt a sense of control and safety in staying indoors and sitting on the couch a certain way, one of many tactics she used to feel some power in her situation. Many days consisted of coming home from school, opening the door to dark, cold and silence, and then feeling the heat from the kettle to determine how long her parents were gone out. Other days Dawn's parents would be there, making dinner. For Dawn, this was confusing and more difficult to deal with than if they were consistently absent. When she started drinking in her teens, Dawn knew she was doing it differently to others. She relied on alcohol to escape from the mounting anxiety.

Yeah I can remember drinking off X street, down a laneway, before I went and met people, just throwing a naggin back on my own first. So, I was drinking to numb. I had all this stuff and I had no way of getting it out. (p.18)

She experienced attention in ways that were not safe or appropriate and Dawn's self-worth diminished. Self-harm, drugs and mental health difficulties were to follow. Now managing her addictions, Dawn works to help others in similar situations. She is proud of her resilience and her faith that she would come through the other side of what she calls the "lonely, dark tunnel" of neglect (p.24).

### *The Meaning of Yearning to Escape*

In order to experience a yearning to escape, there needs to be something one wishes to escape from. For Andrew, Aoife and Dawn, the sense of being confined was an enduring element of their experience of neglect as children. They, along with most participants, experienced being confined as a sense of being trapped in the seemingly never-ending reality of neglect, poverty, addiction, and chaotic households. These environments of confinement led the participants to build up a sense of internal confinement and anxiety in their own bodies that had, for many, physical manifestations. Throughout the interviews, the participants used differing words and phrases to express this sense of being confined, for example, Dearbhla articulated a need to "get rid of the tension" (p.14) and Áine spoke of it "like no escape" (p.4). But the lived experience can be understood as a chronic, enduring need for escape, freedom, a break or some relief.

I didn't get relief and because I couldn't get relief I was in that constant state for a very long time. (Grace, p.6)

The sense of being confined existed across a myriad of perspectives in that the participants experienced confinement in their environment, their thoughts, their emotions and their bodies. Ben explained the physical experiences in the body that he was desperate to be free from.

I just remember, from a child's point of view...that awful, stressful feeling in your belly...in the pit of your stomach, you're going to be sick. Like, I know what it is, it's stressed, it's anxious, it's an anxious feeling but...you're constantly trying to make things up to make that feeling go away. (Ben, p.5)

The experience of being confined led every participant in this study to seek out means of escape. However, even with an array of means of escape, there appears to be a pattern that was followed by many of the participants. The participants appeared to graduate from one form of escape to another as they grew older or as that form of escape no longer led to the release it once had. This graduation involved a progression from somewhat helpful, healthy escapes in childhood to harmful escapes as the participants grew into adolescence. As young children, Dearbhla and Barbara used play and music to escape the sense of being confined that comes with childhood neglect.

I suppose kids escape through play...if you're by yourself there's an inner pain, a loneliness, so that's what the experience of neglect is really. It's painful. (Dearbhla, p.24)

Madness, 'It Must Be Love'...playing that and kind of cheering myself up with the music. I would usually get the speakers and I would lie down with the speakers right up to my ears. It's like having big earphones...I used to just go into the music.

(Barbara, p.11)

Colm and Valerie spoke of the need to physically get away as children.

There was a sense from a very young age...to run away. And the only thing that stopped me was food. That was the only thing. My only concern was, where the fuck would I get food? (Colm, p.8)

I used to be running in the fields. I was constantly running. I was constantly on the go. I was like an Energizer and that was my way of coping with things at the time when it all became too much. (Valerie, p.17)

Áine spoke of a wish to escape – “I remember hoping I was adopted” (p.10), while, similarly, Lily described an experience of wishing to be taken away.

The social worker came in the door and I was like, please take me away, please take me away and I will tell you everything that's happening inside. But I couldn't say it to her because she was sitting here, me and David are on the other side of her and my dad is in between us. (Lily, p.7)

As they moved into their preteen years, destructive behaviours became a means of finding escape for the participants. Colm, like Aoife, spoke of an unhealthy relationship with food.

I remember eating and drugs and smoking. They were always done as something I could do. I even fall back on the eating now as a destructive thing. (Steven, p.17)

Similar to Dawn, Nadine found self-harm as a way of finding escape.

I would have self-harmed and, Jesus, I would have stuck knives in myself a couple of times, the tips, just to feel the pain. (Nadine, p.28)

Moving into adolescence, the vast majority of the participants would have found alcohol and drugs a new and exciting, if harmful, means of escape from the experience of neglect. Valerie described the progression of her means of escape as she entered her teens.

So, age 12, it went from an eating disorder, to picking up a drink, to drugs. So it festers in all different directions. I believe that was my way of coping with things where I felt there was stuff that was pushed under. (Valerie, p.5)



Nadine, like Aoife and Andrew, spoke at length about the solace, relief and freedom she experienced once she found drugs.

I started taking drugs when I was 12. It was 6th class when I started and by third year in school I was full on it. So that was definitely where I went to provide some solace...I think with those tablets and stuff, their job is to kind of balance the mood and level the feelings and kind of numb it out to a certain extent, to a degree, and that's what they did. "Sure if I take tablets everything's grand!" (Nadine, p.9-10)

Beyond the play, imagination, food, alcohol and drugs, several of the participants acknowledged a desire, at times, for the ultimate escape. Suicide was considered as anything from a fleeting thought to a serious plan by many of the participants. Kelly spoke of seeing death as a desirable escape from a very young age.

People would ask me what I wanted to be when I grow up and I would say, "I want to be dead". An uncle of mine had died and we were told about heaven and I just thought, "oh I want to go there". (Kelly, p.7)

Every one of the fifteen participants in this study shared the common human experience of yearning to escape. Each of them persisted, searching for any means of escape from neglect consistently throughout their childhoods and adolescence. This highlights the significance of this phenomenon in the experience of being neglected. A deep sense of yearning to escape from the life-world of neglect pervaded participants' lives for years, each

of them yearning to escape from the intense pressure and inner turmoil of neglect. For each of the participants, brief escapes, both helpful and harmful, afforded them some solace from the monotonous, confusing, dramatic, boring, dark, lonely experience of being neglected in childhood.

### **The Lingering Legacy of Neglect**

The phenomena outlined in this chapter convey the experience of neglect for the participants during their childhoods. But every participant also spoke of how the experience of neglect persisted with them into adulthood and remains with them, in many ways, today. Therefore, this section of the chapter explores the lingering legacy of neglect for the participants in this study, considering the evolution of each experience as the participants moved into adulthood. This part of the chapter highlights that, while the neglect itself happened in childhood, it has made a lasting impact on every adult who participated in this study.

### ***The Legacy of Being Unloved***

Being unloved was the primary, common lived experience for the participants during their childhoods and it has continued to have a profound impact throughout their lives. One facet of this sense of being unloved, in particular, has endured for some participants into adulthood: the experience of *yearning for love*. In her interview, Lily addressed how being unloved led to a pattern of yearning for love which stayed with her into adulthood.

Even growing up into an adult and relationships with men it was like, “anybody just love me!” And I would mind them. (Lily, p.12)

A childhood of being unloved led Lily to seek out love everywhere, even returning to those who denied it to her in childhood. Through all the heartache, she attempted to care for her father until his death, despite the continuing rejection.

I thought he was going to change. I wanted him to say, “I love you”. I wanted to be reassured that everything is going to be okay. But, even growing into the adult that I am today, it never happened, and my brother David said to me “Lily, as long as you go back for reassurance from him you’ll keep getting knocked because he's not going to give it to you and you're the one who is going to suffer” and he was right. (Lily, p.12)

This approval seeking, affection seeking, love seeking, has also remained a feature in Ben’s life, making it difficult for him to assert himself with others, both professionally and personally.

I think that's where the people pleaser things come out in the years to come, because you're constantly trying to do something to get a good reaction. You're looking for a good reaction off him (father) but it's never coming (Ben, p.4)

A childhood spent yearning for love and developing tactics to get love has been exhausting and devastating for these participants. The unreliability of the love they experienced from their parents caused other participants to reject, mistrust and even fear love. This pattern of discomfort in loving relationships was experienced by many of the participants in their adulthood and it persists, for some, as a sense of *being afraid of love*.

I get scared when people love me. I get scared, waiting to be left behind, waiting to be forgotten. So I can push people. I'm not as bad at it as I was. My therapy has helped me hugely but, no, I'd be more afraid of people that I love than somebody that I don't even know. (Kelly, p.9)

Following a childhood of neglect, Colm, like Kelly, also struggled in relationships, rejecting and pushing away those who showed him love.

I didn't trust. I have a wife now and I'm with her years and years, but I didn't trust for a long, long, long time that it would be okay or that there would be a relationship. I didn't trust that she wouldn't leave. So I used to finish it quite regularly. (Colm, p.14)

Nadine explained how the emotionally neglectful relationship she had with her mother led to the development of this fear of love that has endured into adulthood.

I wouldn't ever let her (mum) know I was taking comfort. Even if we were in the bed together, I'd back into her so I'd feel contact but I wouldn't cuddle...I think at that age that would have been too vulnerable a position to be in because you could lean in and then what's the response? Or it's not going to last, and this has prevailed in my relationships...I won't fully put myself out there. I won't depend. (Nadine, p.13)

For Kelly, Colm and Nadine, among others, shielding themselves from love allowed them to remain safe in adulthood; alone, disconnected, but safe. They are now in committed, loving relationships, but all three acknowledge the fear of connection that persists following a childhood of neglect and the conscious efforts they need to make to engage in loving relationships with their partners and children.

### ***The Legacy of Being Inferior***

For many participants, the sense of inferiority they experienced due to neglect in childhood stayed with them into adulthood. The experience of *being not good enough* or *being less than* still lingers with Peter, leaving him with the great sense of shame that can come from a lifetime of seeing yourself, your upbringing and your family as inferior to others.

I have to be honest, I don't know why I'm even saying this but if I was with work colleagues now and I bumped into my mother I think I would be quite embarrassed and I've never ever said that to anybody. It's the first time I've even admitted that but that's hard. (Peter, p.15)

For another participant, Dawn, the lingering experience of being inferior manifests in her belief that she is not good enough for the opportunities afforded to others. Even in adulthood, Dawn sees her experience of being not good enough as a source from which her inability to reach certain seemingly generic milestones was borne.

I find it can just sneak up on me actually, especially around not good enough stuff. Like, I've had to learn to allow myself things, soft things, even the likes of massages, things that were never ever an option. You know what one of the biggest things for me is? I forgot about this. Learning to swim. I never learned to swim. I never learned to drive. I never went to college. I never believed that children were for me and I believe all that stems from neglect. (Dawn, p.21)

A sense of being inferior compounded by a sense of being unloved appears to be ongoing and deeply ingrained in the lived experiences of many of the participants in this study. Like Dawn, other participants acknowledge that they continue to view themselves as less than others following a childhood of neglect. Many continue to hide their background to mask the shame of coming from a neglectful home, still striving to 'pass' as equal to others. None of the participants in this study spoke of an experience of overcoming this sense of inferiority. All continue to hold on to the deep-rooted sense of being inferior.

## *The Legacy of Seesawing*

As children, the participants in this study experienced neglect as chaotic and confusing due to a lack of consistency and balance from their parents. Their lived experience was a constant seesaw of up and down, food and no food, love and no love, togetherness and aloneness. But while confusing, this abnormal way of being became the norm for many participants. So, when seesawing and a lack of balance has always been the norm, how is one meant to know what normal is and maintain it consistently in adulthood? When one has spent a lifetime seesawing, how is one meant to stand one's ground? Emerging from a childhood of neglect, many participants openly acknowledge that they remain unbalanced within themselves as adults, uncertain and unsure of how to be in the world, struggling to make clear decisions or to maintain consistent jobs or relationships.

I was in and out of a relationship for 10 years with a guy, in it for 3 and then 7 years back and forth. (Nadine, p.21)

Even now I'm always second guessing myself. I need to be very assertive and stuff inside in work and...we'll just say I would still second guess myself all the time. Do you know? If that makes sense. (Ben, p.33)

Grace described how seesawing permeated her internal experience as a young adult. For Grace, balance was a constant endeavour that took psychotherapy and years of conscious effort to address.

Making decisions to find enough value in the world but not too much has been like this kind of dance, and then trying to let go of where I have responsibility that actually isn't mine and then trying to actually be responsible for the things that are mine. That balance was never there. Balance. That's the word. I had no sense of what balance looked like. I continued to overwork and then I would drop completely. If the neglect hadn't happened, the balance piece would be different. (Grace, p.30)

Like many others, Grace, Ben and Nadine are aware of how they can fall back into a pattern of seesawing through life if they don't make a deliberate effort to maintain balance in work, relationships and in themselves. It seems that this sense of being unbalanced is a common lived experience that many of the participants have explored and attempted to change in adulthood.

### ***The Legacy of Soldiering***

All but two of the participants in this study are working or training to work in an active role in the areas of community intervention, addiction, medical support, mental health, youth services or social work. Being neglected in moments of violence, self-harm or drug abuse as children later led many of these participants, including Nadine, Dearbhla and Grace, to carry the sense of soldiering into adulthood and pursue front line care jobs which mirror their tough, dramatic childhoods. A lifelong experience of soldiering, layered upon a sense of yearning for love and approval and a need to prove oneself as equal, not inferior, has led many participants to experience a sense of belonging in careers on the frontline.



Complete chaos, which is what I grew up in, and this is now what I work in....I suppose I'm still there (job) because I'm playing out my history...I'm a yes woman so "do you want to do this shit?" "Yes, I will", and then I get burnt out from actually being on the frontline of completely unprocessed drama. (Nadine, p.24)

Like Nadine, Dearbhla works in the area of community support. She believes her childhood experiences have played a part in the role she now plays professionally in which she takes on the chaos in the hope of resolving it.

I suppose trying to fix them (parents) would have been a big thing. Going into the job myself, I suppose part of me is still trying to fix them. (Dearbhla, p.16)

The chaos of a dramatic, challenging, sometimes dangerous job is familiar territory to those who experienced neglect in childhood. After enough time seesawing on the frontline many of the participants adapted and acclimatised to this existence, much like soldiers in war. As explained by Grace, you begin to feel that you are in this frontline job not because of professional aptitudes but because the unique experience of being on the frontline as a child has prepared you for this.

Am I only here (job) because I was *trained* to be here, basically? You know, like, am I here because actually my experience has meant I know how to be here? (Grace, p.22)

Any good soldier who has fought and defended their cause valiantly receives a badge of honour, a testament to their resilience in the face of adversity. For Peter and Dawn, a sense of pride comes with the badge of honour they carry with them today as adults for being resilient through a childhood of neglect.

Probably my biggest asset is that I'm resilient. Sometimes if the chips are really down and you're after getting a couple of knocks and you're in bed thinking "how am I going to get through this?" I don't know, there's something that clicks in with me and I just do the next right thing and I eventually work out of it. (Peter, p.27)

I am who I am today because of a lot of things that have happened in my life and the neglect is one thing...I suppose it's made me the person I am, you know, and I'm fairly resilient. I can survive a fair amount...You learn to become what you need to become fairly young...As a child in the dark on your own, fuck it you become strong fair enough, fairly quickly. (Dawn, p.23)

For many of the participants in this study, the pride of being resilient brings with it a soothing reassurance, be it factual or not, that the neglect served them in some way. For them, in contrast to the other legacies, being resilient is evidence that there was some good that came out of the chaos of their childhoods, seemingly proving to them that their suffering was not all in vain.

I had to go through the tough stuff. There is no other way. You have to go through the shit to come out the other side...we have to go through this shit to get the truth.

(Valerie, p.18)

There *is* positives to this. There definitely is positives. The positives are: I can do almost anything myself...I could always cook, take care of myself, don't really have to rely on people. I *can* but I don't have to. I have a belief that you can get through and overcome and survive and really there's nothing to fear...I've done this as a child, I can do it again. (Colm, p.16)

Carrying a belief in their own, acquired resilience breeds a sense of hope for many participants and this is what drives them forward, the hope that they can have positive experiences going forward, borne out of the resilience they built up in enduring a childhood of neglect. Interestingly, the resilience they now experience is a positive outcome that the participants spoke of regarding their childhoods of neglect, and it appears to be a powerful force for many of them. Many of the adults in this study are now fuelled and empowered by the knowledge that they, as children, soldiered on in the absence of support, education, encouragement, or real connection with siblings.

I still know there's hope, there's always been hope...and there's always been a drive to do better, to not play out the same life and to know that, actually, there's freedom to be had in life. There's peace to be had. There's a lot of love. (Nadine, p.28)

### *The Legacy of Yearning to Escape*

The experience of yearning to escape was endured by every participant in this study during their childhood and it has had a significant impact on each of them in adulthood. Firstly, the sense of *being confined* which prompted the need for escape lingers on for many participants in adulthood. While the environmental aspects of being confined were left behind as the participants moved out of home and became adults, Steven spoke about how he often finds himself continuing to hold onto the experience of being confined even to this day.

It's amazing to notice it and notice how much tightness and restriction I've been carrying for so long. It's very tough, it's everywhere in my life (Steven, p.23)

Similarly, Peter and Valerie spoke of carrying a smothering darkness with them now in adulthood, which leaves them yearning for freedom.

I always feel that I'm always carrying a darkness, that I'm struggling all the time to break free from. It's always with me I think. It definitely left an impact. (Peter, p.27)

Just like a depression coming in, a cloud, like going into a black hole. I suppose its unhealthy behaviours, unhealthy attachments, like not being able to breathe or be yourself or feel free. (Valerie, p.16)

Dawn, like nearly every other participant, spoke of how addiction and mental health issues really took hold in her late teens and early twenties as she continued attempts to escape from the confinement, the tightness and the darkness. For when you have spent your childhood and adolescence yearning to escape, how are you meant to avoid the extremes of escape when you become an adult and are warranted the freedom you have craved for so long? For Dawn, like many others, the means of escape she found in her teens continued and became more destructive in her twenties before she gained sobriety and balance later in life.

From 18 on, those are probably the worst years of my life. They were spent in and out of psychiatric care numerous times every year and lots of suicide attempts and lots of addiction, drinking, drugs...they were quite desperate times really. (Dawn, p.20)

Every participant in this study spoke of a similar pattern; a sense of being confined led to a yearning for escape, which escalated as they grew older, before they found means of managing it in adulthood. For many participants, there are escape routes that they continue to use when they are overwhelmed, be they helpful or harmful, including the abuse of food, physically escaping from commitments or relationships, or thrill seeking. Overall, it seems that, regardless of the differing paths they have taken in adulthood and the choices they have made to exist with or overcome their escape patterns, the neglected children the participants once were live on in these sometimes frightened, ashamed, unbalanced, resilient and hopeful adults. For the fifteen participants in this study, it appears the lived experience of childhood neglect is a journey that has not yet ended.

## Chapter Summary: Journeying Through Neglect

In unearthing and revealing the five common human experiences of childhood neglect in this chapter, *being unloved*, *being inferior*, *seesawing*, *soldiering*, and *yearning to escape*, a sense of connection between them was illuminated, as if the participants travelled a path through and from one to another, forging the pathways which make up the roadmap of what it is to experience childhood neglect. In this way, the experience of neglect can be best understood as an experience of journeying through these phenomena, journeying through neglect.

For the fifteen participants in this study, journeying through neglect is a constant, unending life experience. It does not begin at birth and end upon reaching adulthood, rather it is an ongoing experience which involves continued journeying between the five distinct phenomena uncovered in this chapter. A sense of *being unloved* is one distinct and core element of the journey. From here, the participants, first as children, and still often as adults, plod forward, alone and unnoticed, into a sense of *being inferior* within themselves and in meeting others who are on more concrete, predictable life paths. Exhausted from carrying the weight of being unloved and being inferior, many participants then find themselves *seesawing*, confused and unbalanced. The resilience required to continue journeying through neglect emerges as a sense of *soldiering* on the part of the participants. They develop skills, roles and a wariness toward others who might bring them harm as they travel along their lonely path. Sometimes, when it all becomes too much on this journey, there is a *yearning for escape*. The participants seek out escape routes, means of taking a break, avoiding the path, but as is the case for all of the participants in this study, they are always returning to the path, for it is their path, the path they continue to walk today.

As adults, the participants in this study understand that, for them, the process of journeying through neglect will never be fully complete. The immediate lived experience of childhood neglect ended when each participant left home in young adulthood, but the sense of neglect, its lingering legacy and the experience of journeying is a pervading lived experience. With this knowledge, every participant continues to journey along their path, taking comfort and pride in the reassuring awareness that they were, as children, and are, as adults, resilient, skilled, and hopeful. For it is the journeying itself that made them so.

## Chapter 5. Discussion

This is the path that my life has taken.

(Áine, p.33)

### Introduction

Journeying through neglect is a life-long expedition, which the participants in this study continue to navigate. The findings chapter of this study, in a similar vein, takes the reader on a journey through the fifteen stories of the participants and several distinct phenomena to arrive at an understanding of what it is really like to experience neglect. Some aspects of the phenomena uncovered in this study mirror outcomes previously concluded in the empirical literature, others forge novel pathways toward a deeper exploration of the experience of neglect than has been offered before. This discussion chapter will take a similar journey, setting out from a familiar place by contextualising the findings within the existing empirical and practice literature in psychotherapy and related disciplines, acknowledging the key correlations between the phenomenological findings presented here and research that has gone before. It will then lead into uncharted terrain, exploring the most prominent and unique conclusions that have been uncovered in this study, namely, the emotional experience of neglect, the phenomenon of seesawing and the common lived experience of returning to the frontline in adulthood. From this point, this study ventures one step further, offering a contemporary, descriptive summary of neglect, with the aim of supporting those who have experienced neglect to better understand themselves and their journeys, as well as contributing a greater awareness of the experience of childhood neglect to psychotherapy and related fields. In this way, this chapter will showcase how a hermeneutic phenomenological focus on adults' experiences of neglect in childhood can deepen our understanding of the



experience of childhood neglect and its remnants in adulthood. Finally, our journey through this chapter will come to an end with recommendations to psychotherapy, an evaluation of this study and a reflection on the journey that has been this study of adults' experiences of neglect in childhood.

### **Crossing Paths: Links to Previous Research**

While some findings of this study on the lived experience of neglect are original and contribute a new voice to the field, an array of correlations can also be observed with the empirical literature. Parallels can be found not only in the phenomena that have emerged from the analysis but in the raw data, as demographic and contextual circumstances of neglect. The literature review illuminated how the primary knowledge base around childhood neglect is centred on contributing and protective factors, as well as the effects of neglect in childhood and adulthood. This section of the chapter will contribute new perspectives on the information presented in the literature review.

As evident in the literature review, the contributing factors associated with neglect are a complex integration and amalgamation of issues, but several repeatedly feature across the research landscape. This study of adults' lived experiences of neglect in childhood discovered that parental mental health difficulties and parental addiction were key contributors to neglect for the majority of participants in this study. Additionally, several participants noted that neglect was brought upon by the poverty they experienced throughout their childhoods. These findings parallel with the empirical research, echoing the findings of Peyton's 2012 National Audit of Neglect in Ireland. A lack of neighbourhood social cohesion was an issue which also compounded the experience of neglect for several participants, specifically concerning their sense of being unloved or being inferior. Steven, Dearbhla, Barbara, Peter and Grace all spoke of moving into a different area and being the new family or just being

generally unaccepted in the neighbourhood, due to, as they understood it, their parents' addictions, parental behaviours, differing cultures or their noticeable poverty in comparison to neighbours. This led to difficulty in connecting with the local community and this lack of connection to the outside environment in some ways further facilitated neglect in the home. This mirrors the existing literature concerning the importance of neighbourhood social cohesion in preventing and intervening in cases of childhood neglect (Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016; Swenson & Chaffin, 2006).

While the current literature base identifies neighbourhood as a key environmental factor in childhood neglect, one specific experience of this emerged in the interviews: rural living. Three participants, Colm, Ben and Steven, spoke of existing in a rural setting as a significant contributor to their experience of neglect, as the lack of neighbours, friends or general socialisation meant there was a lack of awareness around what was happening or not happening in their houses. In this way, the hermeneutic phenomenological concept of the "life-world" (Moran et al., 2012, p.191) and its inseparable relationship with the individual is evident in the participants' common human experience that rural living exacerbated their experiences of neglect as children. Rural living as a contributory factor for neglect is a significant finding of this study, which contradicts the findings of some recent studies which suggest that rural living provides a sense of community and, thus, a lower sense of isolation and loneliness than urban living (Henning-Smith et al., 2019). It appears that the context of living within a family and a small community prompts an assumption that one cannot or should not experience a sense of aloneness or a sense of being unloved. This, however, was not the lived experience of some of the participants in this study. Research has previously referenced the lack of social work and mental health services in rural communities (McElvaney et al., 2013), but rural living as a contributory factor for neglect is a new and interesting finding of this study.

In contrast to the sense of being unloved and being inferior which was compounded for some participants by rural living, protective neighbourhood factors were experienced by Valerie, Kelly and Nadine, who retrospectively acknowledged the support their families garnered from the community, even if the support wasn't toward them specifically. Several participants also spoke of enjoying primary school, with some saying directly that they "loved school" (Dawn, p.6; Kelly, p.10) or "liked school" (Nadine, p.7). For many participants, school served as a protective buffer against aspects of neglect, including lack of food, lack of medical care, lack of supervision and lack of affection. In this way, school filled the gap left by neglect in the home and, it seems, served to slow down the seesawing some participants experienced in the chaos of neglect by providing consistency, reliability and safety, which every participant was deprived of in their experience of neglect as a child. Interestingly, it was the participants who moved around a lot as children who did not enjoy the same sense of balance and comfort which others experienced in school.

Beyond the contributory and protective factors of neglect, for each of the fifteen participants in this study, the effects of neglect in childhood co-existed across a wide spectrum of domains. Several participants, including Barbara, Peter, Lily and Andrew, spoke of more tangible types of neglect, such as lack of food, lack of medical care or lack of material items, affecting their lived experience growing up. In the context of existing literature, resulting impairments in physical and neurodevelopment, language acquisition and motor skills have been a regular feature of research on child neglect (McLaughlin et al., 2017). However, the participants in this study spoke more about the psychological issues that emerged from experiencing neglect, rather than any physical or biological effects which developed. Experiences of anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidality were relayed by many of the participants, which correlates with some of the existing research on child neglect

(Choi et al., 2017; Hanson, 2008; Hussey et al., 2006). However, one of the more prominent effects of neglect described and interpreted in this study concerns issues with relationships.

The psychotherapy and psychology research literature has long categorised relationships within a childhood of maltreatment as insecure attachments (Cicchetti, Rogosch & Toth, 2006; Stubenbort et al., 2010), with neglectful relationships more than often classified as ambivalent attachments (Finzi et al., 2001; Granqvist et al. 2017; Grumbaum, 2018; Jacobsen & McKinney, 2015). These types of attachments are identified by inconsistent and unpredictable care on the part of the caregiver and a pattern for the child of seeking attention but remaining inconsolable once receiving it, craving contact yet resisting it when offered (Horwath, 2007). This style of attachment is reflected widely across this study. Every participant spoke of relational difficulties in childhood, which began with their relationships with their parents and their siblings. Dawn and Barbara referenced the childhood effect of this as a seeming inability to engage socially or relationally with others, having been deprived of a secure relationship from which to venture out and develop further connections. Furthermore, Lily and Steven spoke of the ambivalence they experienced in wanting to be incredibly close to their parents but also experiencing an instinct to be removed from them. Like many of the participants, they yearned desperately for love and emotional connection as children and sought this out without consideration for their own safety or awareness of boundaries.

The relational experiences of the participants in their childhoods reflect the writings of Macke (2014, p.12), who explains, “we exit the womb crying, helpless, and aching for human contact... We navigate our way through the challenges and struggles of family life by habituating”. Macke’s reference to habituating can be very much observed in the parentification of the participants in this study, articulated best through the experience of role taking within the *soldiering* experience. Parentification is one of the many relational issues

that has been explored in the literature on child maltreatment (Kane & Bornstein, 2017; Maguire & Naughton, 2016) and it is often traced back to an insecure emotional attachment with a parental figure, in other words, the lack of a secure base (Braunstein-Bercovitz et al., 2014). Grunbaum (2018, p.381) entitled this lack of a secure base for children of trauma “psychological homelessness” but the findings of this study suggest that these experiences point more to a sense of emotional homelessness. In this way, one can observe the clear correlations between the phenomenon of *being unloved* in this study and previous findings in the empirical literature on the childhood effects of neglect.

This study also crosses paths with existing research in the identification of an array of long-term effects of childhood neglect. In parallel with the literature, the participants in this study experienced vulnerability to addiction (Bennett, 2012) and mental health difficulties (Wu et al., 2018) as they entered adulthood, with some issues still presenting in their lives as *the legacy of yearning to escape*. Additionally, the relational problems of childhood persisted into adulthood for many of the participants, appearing most strongly in this study as *the legacy of being unloved*. Carrying a sense of being unloved through childhood and adolescence made it difficult for many of the participants in this study to initially engage in healthy, boundaried, balanced relationships in adulthood. Colm, for example, explained “I have a wife now...but I didn’t trust for a long, long, long time...that she wouldn’t leave. So I used to finish it quite regularly” (p.14). This difficulty in adult relationships is reflected in the wider literature on childhood trauma, which posits that childhood trauma leads to adult relationship instability (Banford et al., 2018). This also includes the persistent difficulties childhood trauma survivors can have in relationships with their parents in adulthood (Kong & Martire, 2019).

Curiously, in reflecting on the effects of childhood neglect in adulthood, ten of the fifteen participants in this study spoke openly about their experiences of addiction, which

feature heavily in the findings within the phenomenon of *yearning to escape*. This prompts one to question whether a connection lies between neglect and addiction specifically or whether sourcing participants via private psychotherapists led to individuals more likely to have experienced addiction, as this population may have more experience of psychotherapy intervention than the general population. While the latter is a valid theory, in recent years there has been an increased research focus on the connection between child maltreatment and addiction, with interesting results emerging concerning the relationship between addiction and childhood neglect specifically. In their study of male abstinent heroin dependents, Gerra et al. (2014) found a significant correlation between childhood neglect and addiction severity in adulthood. According to the researchers, “child neglect poses a significant challenge to children's psychobiological development and wellbeing, with a long-lasting vulnerability condition that can predispose to the most severe forms of substance abuse disorders” (Gerra et al., 2014, p.228). In 2015, following their study of female cocaine-addicted women, Rovaris et al. declared “childhood neglect and poor parent-child attachment being the main factors related to cocaine use during adulthood” (p.84). These findings further support Wendt Viola et al.'s 2013 study which found a significant correlation between physical neglect in childhood and cocaine addiction in later life. The affiliation between childhood neglect and severe substance addiction in adulthood is a surprisingly definite outcome of several studies and mirrors the large number of participants in this study who experienced addiction, as well as the emergence of the phenomenon *yearning to escape* as one of the key pillars in the experience of neglect.

The potential effects of neglect in childhood and adulthood are numerous and exist across an array of biological, social, emotional and psychological plains. As explained by Pearce and Pezzot-Pearce (2013, p.40), “the outcomes of maltreatment do not fall neatly into one diagnostic category and do not constitute a homogeneous syndrome that we can call “the

maltreated child””. While many of the effects of neglect found in this study coincide with the effects found in the existing literature, the common lived experiences of the fifteen adult participants in this study were not experienced as directly connected to the effects. In other words, the experience of neglect existed for the participants as *being unloved, being inferior, seesawing, soldiering* and *yearning to escape*. These phenomena were consistent across participants, regardless of the effects, the type of neglect experienced, participant background, age, socio-economic background, or gender. For example, while Andrew may have exhibited the effects of neglect as anxiety and behavioural difficulties in school linked to an absent father and low income, and Aoife exhibited self-injurious behaviour, low mood, possible dissociation and a co-dependent relationship with her mother, the experience of childhood neglect for both can be understood through the phenomena outlined in the findings chapter. In observing these two cases, the contributory factors and effects of neglect in childhood and adulthood were vastly different, but their core, lived experiences of neglect are strikingly similar. For Andrew, Aoife and many other participants, the primary lived experience within their experiences of neglect is that every type of neglect, regardless of effects or contributors, is experienced as emotional neglect.

### **Being Starved of Love: The Emotional Experience of Neglect**

The emotional neglect experienced by every participant in this study was described by many as the most detrimental and hurtful form of maltreatment they experienced in childhood. This can be most clearly observed in the findings as *being unloved*, which was consciously and deliberately positioned as the first phenomenon in the findings. While most of the adult participants in this study experienced several forms of neglect in childhood, including physical neglect, medical neglect and educational neglect, retrospectively, the pain of emotional neglect appears to have left the most enduring legacy. Furthermore, in cases

wherein the participants also experienced other forms of child abuse, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse, as is common according to the empirical literature (Stoltenborgh et al., 2015), the experience of emotional neglect, of being unloved, was still, as stated by many participants, the hardest part of their childhood lived experience. This is a key finding of this study and an important addition to the empirical literature on child maltreatment, wherein the vast majority of research has been focused on physical, sexual and emotional abuse and little research has been conducted into neglect, let alone subtypes of neglect, such as emotional neglect (James & Mennen, 2001; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016; Stoltenborgh et al., 2013).

In recent years, researchers have begun to explore, in greater depth, the subject of emotional maltreatment, slowly disseminating an awareness that emotional maltreatment can be even more harmful than other forms of abuse, in terms of the long-term development of mental health difficulties, including depression (Christ et al., 2019). While this greater understanding is welcomed, researchers, professionals and institutions across the world often place emotional neglect under the unsuitable umbrella of emotional abuse and develop statistics, policies and training based on this categorisation (Department of Children & Youth Affairs, 2017). Alternatively, researchers Maguire and Naughton (2016) argue that emotional abuse and neglect should be viewed as part of a spectrum, while Taillieu et al. (2016), along with many others, organise emotional abuse and neglect together under the broader term emotional maltreatment. In this study, however, participants highlighted distinct phenomena which emerged from the experience of emotional neglect specifically, rather than emotional abuse, which many experienced also. Therefore, in considering the common lived experience of neglect, this study argues that it is important to clarify distinctions between emotional abuse and emotional neglect. This correlates with the work of Hopper et al. (2019), who explain that emotional neglect concerns lack of emotional availability and lack of emotional



presence due to extreme stresses, while emotional abuse includes chronic blaming, intimidation and excessive monitoring. Plainly, as described in the literature review, abuse is about committed acts, neglect is about omission (Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016). In this study, the omission of love was at the core of the participants' experiences of neglect.

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from my home.

(From 'Freedom', 1970, performed by Richie Havens and understood by Steven)

The phenomenon of *being unloved* is at the core of the experience of neglect. In this way, this study posits that it is the beginning of the journey of neglect. For the participants in this study, their experience of neglect as children began from a place of *being unloved*, leading to a sense of *being inferior* to others who were loved. They then experienced chaos and confusion as love was given and taken away (*seesawing*), before quickly learning that they must survive on their own (*soldiering*). Sometimes the pain of being unloved and the experiences that unfolded from there were unbearable and they experienced a *yearning to escape* in any way in childhood and adolescence. For every participant, the experience of being unloved continues to resonate with them in their lives today (*the lingering legacy of neglect*). Within the existing literature, there appears to be some recognition of a connection between emotional neglect and a variety of behavioural and relational outcomes in both childhood and adulthood, but this study highlights the essential sense of being unloved as the catalyst, the starting point, the nexus of the experience of neglect from which other experiences manifest.

I didn't care about being dirty or starving, all I wanted was to be told I was loved

(Lily, p.36)

One of the most interesting findings of this study, in terms of the emotional experience of neglect, concerns the lack of relationship or strained relationships between the participants and their siblings. In discussing their siblings, the responses of the participants mirror the very nature of neglect itself in that the phenomenon is in not what is present but that which is omitted. The data can be found in not what is said, but what is unsaid. Many participants never mentioned their siblings in discussing their experiences of growing up in their home. Others mentioned their siblings briefly when prompted and, often, with what appeared to be a sense of jealousy or anger. This is best described in the findings as the experience of *being a lone soldier*, which refers to how neglect breeds a preoccupation with individual survival.

This study is the first avenue through which the experience of sibling relationships in cases of neglect has been uncovered. The emotional distance, competition and disconnection evident between many of the participants in this study and their siblings has only briefly been referenced previously in the empirical literature on childhood trauma. Grunbaum (2018), in her child psychotherapy studies, refers to the relationships between family members in cases of complex trauma. She takes a Kleinian perspective, explaining “the child may unconsciously try to rid the self of the ownership of aggression and anxiety by identifying someone or something else as possessing this uncanniness, for instance, authority figures, parental figures, or figures of siblings and peers” (Grunbaum, 2018, p.382). There is an interesting correlation here between this psychoanalytic perspective and the experience of the participants in this study, some of whom appear to have demonised their siblings, as well as their parents, and pushed themselves further into the experience of *being a lone soldier*. This

narrative of *being a lone soldier* and *every man for himself*, retold to oneself over and over, can feed the experience of *being unloved* for those who have experienced neglect and, thus, further exacerbate the experience of emotional neglect.

References to children who have been neglected as being “unloved” have been previously found in the literature (Rees et al., 2017, p.22; Williams, 2017, p.11) and there is a significant foundation of research and practice literature identifying insecure attachments (Braunstein-Bercovitz et al., 2014; Grunbaum, 2018), relational trauma and emotional neglect as key components in cases of child maltreatment (Bennett, 2012; Hopper et al., 2019). While taking a new perspective in illuminating the voices of adults who have experience neglect as children, this study stands on the shoulders of much of this contemporary literature and positions *being unloved* at the core of the experience of neglect and every other experience of child maltreatment.

The lack of love. Like, when you think about a child today, would you deny them that?

(Colm, p.25)

### **Seesawing: An Ambivalent Existence**

The children stood and gazed round it. It seemed a very exciting land... There were roundabouts going round and round in time to music. There were swings and seesaws.

(From ‘The Magic Faraway Tree’, written by Enid Blyton, 1945, read by Kelly)

*Seesawing* is a unique term that has emerged from this study. It represents the common lived experience of neglect as one of constant imbalance, a chronic state of contradiction, a sense of toing and froing, back and forth, swinging up and down, across a multitude of dimensions. Being on a seesaw can be a fun experience for a child as they enjoy the sense of excitement, play and, perhaps, danger that the experience can bring. However, living in a constantly seesawing existence throughout childhood is a confusing, exhausting, and unnerving experience. For the participants in this study, the phenomenon of *seesawing* was evident in their childhoods in their insecure familial relationships and, consequently, in an ambivalent sense of self and ambivalent understanding of their life-world. While confusing, the participants in this study became so used to the rhythm of the seesaw in their parental relationships and within themselves that they continued seesawing into adulthood. So much so that stepping off the seesaw and standing on balanced, solid ground remains a challenging experience for many of the adults in this study who were neglected as children.

You know what, and if my therapist heard me, but I don't think there's ever balance, really. There is balanced to an extent but you're never going to get that 50% balance that everyone looks for. It's virtually impossible...it's always going to be swinging.

(Valerie, p.22)

In exploring the two experiences of seesawing, namely, relationships and ambivalent existence, we return to the path from which we have just emerged, regarding the emotional experience of neglect. As described, emotional neglect has been uncovered in this study as the core of the experience of neglect. But emotional neglect does not only describe a lack of connection or presence from the parent. It can be understood as an inconsistency in emotional

connection or emotional presence. In this way, seesawing represents the experience of neglect as unsteady and unpredictable, rather than a “persistent failure” (Department for Education, 2012, H11, p.2) or “omission” as primarily described in definitions (DCYA, 2011, p.8). Seesawing embodies an experience of neglect that is characterised by enduring experiences of chaos and unreliability in the emotional attachment between the child and their parent.

While seesawing is a new linguistic term presented by this study, it relates to the literature across a variety of areas, including cognitive development (Holmes, 1999), psychological responses to maltreatment (Lowe, 2016), emotional dysregulation (Grossman et al., 2017) and enduring issues in adult mental health (Parolin et al., 2017). Aspects of seesawing can also be observed in the empirical literature on attachment, particularly regarding the ambivalent attachment style most associated with neglect. The sense of inconsistency and unreliability in the emotional attachments the participants experienced with their parents and siblings was the first manifestation of seesawing that was evident within the interviews. Relational connections were repeatedly made and broken, sometimes day by day, sometimes minute by minute. In their retrospective accounts, the adult participants in this study described how, as children, their instincts force them to seesaw between an instinct to stay away and remain safe from the maltreating parent and a need for comfort and nurturing that they could only receive from the same parent. This links to Main and Hesse’s (1990, p.163) description of the parent as both “the source of and the solution to (the child’s) alarm”. Further to this, Granqvist et al. (2017, p.5) explain how, even in infancy, “infants may have experienced unreliable caregiver responsiveness when they make their desire for comfort known, leading them to be highly vigilant about their attachment figure’s accessibility.” This constant vigilance can be best observed within the *soldiering* phenomenon in this study, while the moving back and forth between instinctual polarities is evident through the experience of *being unloved*, wherein many participants experienced a *yearning for love* in

tandem with a sense of *being afraid of love*. In this way, the seesawing experience of neglect can be seen to permeate across several other phenomena identified in the findings.

The participants in this study shared how the imbalance and chaos that is referred to here as *seesawing* led to an internalised sense of either/or for them as children, manifesting as a persistent sense of swinging and an inability to achieve balance or a middle ground on any issue. This prompts one to wonder if this binary sense of right or wrong that develops within the neglected child further exacerbates the insecure attachments they have with their parents, leaving it highly improbable that the parent will ever be seen as a “good enough mother” in the eyes of the child (Winnicott, 1991, p.10). This suggests that, regardless of the progress and changes made by the parent, even as the child grows into adulthood, the parent may always seesaw between being idealised or demonised in the eyes of their child and may never achieve the balance that the concept of good enough exemplifies. This was certainly evident in this study, as the participants sometimes split their experiences of their parents into one good parent and one bad parent, or split the one parent into distinctly good or bad depending on the moment or the behaviour. This is an intriguing consideration which has emerged from this study, leaving one to question whether the long-term issues in the relationships between the participants and their parents are due to *the lingering legacy of being unloved* or a representation of the *seesawing* phenomenon, which has left the participants unable to see the good enough in their parents, themselves and perhaps others in their life-worlds.

Positioning *seesawing* within the empirical literature, the sense of polarisation identified in the participants’ approach to their relationships parallels Holmes’ description of the lack of “psychological fluidity” (1999, p.56) which can be found in children who do not have a reliable relationship with a parent. From a psychotherapeutic standpoint, Lowe (2016) explains that splitting or, similarly, dissociation is a common coping strategy for maltreated children, while the seesawing behaviours of those who have experienced neglect can be

observed in the literature in what Grossman et al. (2017, p.90) term “overwhelming and often oscillating states of extreme dysregulation”. A sense of dysregulation can be observed in this study through the participants descriptions of themselves as victims, yet aggressors, powerful, yet powerless, bitter, yet resigned. As explained in the findings, this seesawing between experiences does not represent a covering up or inconsistency on the part of the participants. For them, both polarities are part of their enduring lived experience, as is the ambivalence between them. In fact, it is from the ambivalent caregiving of their parents, their own ambivalent behaviour, and their overall ambivalent life experience that the participants in this study developed their precarious sense of self and sense of the life-world in which they exist. In this way, while aspects of seesawing can be found in the literature on ambivalent attachment, dysregulation or splitting, this study is the first to collate these symptoms of trauma as indicators of one essential experience of neglect. From this perspective, we can observe the phenomenon of *seesawing* as a filter through which the adult who was neglected in childhood views their life-world, and, thus, begin to better understand their experience.

I don't have hopes and dreams,  
And I don't have plans and schemes,  
I, I, I don't have anything,  
Since I don't have you.

(From ‘Since I Don’t Have You’, written by Taylor et al., 1958, performed by  
Guns N’ Roses, 1993, appreciated by Ben)

Ben’s favourite song mirrors the lack of sense of self he experienced as a child and adolescent, due to the lack of secure base in his relationships at home. This led to Ben’s

difficulties in knowing his own mind, forming his own opinions, and planning his future. For if one spends all their time merely surviving, keeping vigilant and swinging between polarities, there is no balanced, solid footing from which to explore or uncover an authentic understanding of oneself or one's existence in the world. If the individual is continuously seesawing, existing in a transitory limbo, it is not possible to forge a clear identity rooted in any foundation. The seesawing itself appears to become an action that burrows into the essential being of each participant.

In considering the seesawing reality of those who have been neglected, it is interesting to reflect on the phenomenological principle of the life-world, that we are formed from and cannot be objective outside of our lived experience, relationships, community or culture, through "intercorporeality" (Fuchs in Gipps & Lacewing, 2019, p.457). This reliance on the other speaks to Heidegger's concept of "Das Man", or "the they" (1996, p.107). From this perspective, the seesawing nature of their relationships with others results in an inner sense of seesawing for the child, manifesting as "the constant conflict between spontaneity and reflectivity, body and soul, nature and nurture" (Fuchs, in Gipps and Lacewing, 2019, p.468).

As with the experience of emotional neglect, *the lingering legacy of seesawing* has persisted for many participants in adulthood and remains an enduring lived experience. Considering empirical literature which, in some ways, parallels the phenomenon of seesawing, literature into adult mental health appears to correlate most closely with the findings in this study. The sense of swinging back and forth between extremes has been well documented in areas of adult mental health, particularly in describing the dysregulation patterns of mental illnesses, including addiction (Parolin et al., 2017) and borderline personality disorder (Carpenter & Trull, 2013). These issues in adulthood have often been associated with alexithymia, an inability to connect with and identify one's feelings, which can be observed in the confusion brought on by seesawing in relating to one's self or life-



world. Histories of addiction and mental health issues have been the catalyst for most of the participants in this study to engage in psychotherapy, with the experience of seesawing and its implications having been a primary focus of many of the participants in their psychotherapy sessions in adulthood, although not in name. Many participants expressed that they remain on a journey in search of the elusive balance they have not yet found. In this way, psychotherapy has supported the participants in this study to identify a pattern of seesawing in their difficulties in relationships, relapses into addiction, dysregulation in emotions and behaviours, experiences of alexithymia, and confusion regarding their sense of self. This study offers *seesawing* as a shared human experience in which to contextualise this array of seemingly individual issues as aspects of the one phenomenon, supporting psychotherapists to better understand their clients who were neglected in childhood.

### **Returning to the Frontline**

Am I only here because I was trained to be here, basically? You know, like, am I here because my experience has meant I know how to be here?

(Grace, p.22)

Thirteen of the participants in this study work, or are training to work, in some form of frontline job in the helping professions, such as social work, addiction, mental health, social care, nursing or youth work. The participants were not sourced based on this criterion so this is an interesting, unexpected finding socio-demographically alone, within the context of a qualitative study. More remarkably, beyond the simply categorical data, each of the

thirteen participants spoke, unprompted, of how they believe a childhood of neglect led them to their field. In many ways, *soldiering* is the evocative, visceral term that appears to best capture this legacy of neglect in adulthood, this returning to the frontline. The experience of neglect or any form of child maltreatment has never been termed as the experience of *soldiering* before, however, clear connections can be found between *soldiering*, as uncovered in this study, and the empirical literature. Particular resonance can be found with the literature on resilience (Ben-David & Jonson Reid, 2017; Cicchetti & Garmezy, 1993) and post-traumatic growth (Mohr & Rosen, 2017), as well as perspectives on developmental and complex trauma (Grunbaum, 2018; Van der Kolk, 2005). Soldiering is an important outcome of this research that represents the lived experience of neglect, both for the child and for the adult they become. This section will detail how the experience of soldiering and other phenomena prompted participants to return to the frontline in adulthood, highlighting the novel aspects of this finding while acknowledging connections to existing psychotherapy literature.

A pattern of returning to the frontline is most evident in the section entitled *The Lingering Legacy of Soldiering*. The phenomenon of soldiering conveys the experience of neglect and how it lingers in adulthood. It refers to the participants' childhood experiences of *being on the frontline* in witnessing chaotic and violent incidents in their home, *existing in survival mode*, referring to the sense of vigilance they adopted as children in these environments, and a sense of *being a lone soldier*, wherein they believed they were alone in their neglected experience and, thus, looked out for themselves alone, as a means of survival. In adulthood, the phenomenon of soldiering appeared to linger for these participants as they spoke of feeling comfortable, almost at home in jobs filled with chaos, unpredictability and, sometimes, danger. In this way, the uncovering of the phenomenon of *soldiering* articulates

the journey the participants took from the experience of childhood neglect to existing on the frontline in adulthood.

The experience of soldiering in neglect can be explored from a unique perspective when considered phenomenologically. When we take on a role in order to survive, we can be said to be living inauthentically, living our lives for others, “the they” or “Das Man”, as Heidegger called it (1996, p.107). Heidegger believed that one should strive to live an authentic life, unconstrained by the other, with an awareness of our own existence and mortality. *Soldiering* is an experience one could categorise, phenomenologically, as being inauthentic. The neglected child lives their life and takes on roles in order to meet the needs of “the they” (their parents in most cases), to get attention from “the they”, and thus, ensure their own survival (Heidegger, 1996, p.107). Existing in this way was not an authentic choice but an imposed way of being. This study, therefore, would suggest that living authentically as a child of neglect would be unwise. In many ways, inauthenticity was the key to survival for many of the participants in this study. Perhaps it is not that Heidegger’s perception of authenticity doesn’t apply here, rather the search for authentic existence is more the pursuit of the adult on the frontline, the adult in psychotherapy, rather than the child soldiering through neglect. According to the retrospective accounts of the participants in this study, soldiering was a means to an end, a way of surviving and establishing a sense of resilience. I, as the researcher in this study, would argue that this ability to soldier through neglect is one of the experiences which led the thirteen participants to return to the frontline in adulthood. The sense of belonging in this kind of world, as articulated by the participants in this study, can also be understood through the phenomenological concept of the “life-world”, the world in which we exist and from which we establish our understandings of values, behaviour and rules (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p.8). For when a life of soldiering is all you have ever known,

continuing to exist on the frontline of battle in adulthood can appear almost comforting, as it is a known, familiar way of existing.

In considering connections to existing research, the understanding of a childhood of maltreatment as a precursor to a career in the helping professions is well supported in the psychotherapy literature and beyond (Buchbinder, 2007). In their review of studies focused on the role of childhood emotional maltreatment as a precursor to careers in the mental health field, Braunstein-Bercovitz et al. (2014) explained that, within the psychotherapy literature, there are a myriad of explanations given to the decision of formerly maltreated people to pursue a career in the helping professions. This includes the psychoanalytic perspective that it is a primarily unconscious process (Marcus, 2017) or the attachment theory view that it is the outcome of ambivalent or disorganised attachment styles (Klayman Farber, 2016). In psychotherapy literature, much is written about the concept of the wounded healer (Jung, 1966), the individual who uses their pain and life experience to understand and heal others. Braunstein-Bercovitz et al. (2014) found that parentification in childhood positively correlated with cooperative therapeutic alliances between professional and client, as the professional has a history of empathic response, paying attention to others' needs, and has developed the skills for coping with distress. Grunbaum (2018, p.383) also relayed that complex trauma, such as chronic neglect, can leave one in a state of "hyper-vigilant alertness", which some could view as an important trait when working in the helping professions. These claims correlate positively with the experience of role-taking, as observed in this study as an aspect of soldiering entitled *being on the frontline*. Although these roles, often consisting of a role reversal between parent and child, can be viewed as manifestations of insecure attachment (Bowlby, 2012), Trusty et al. (2005) found in their study of counselling students that those with insecure attachments in childhood showed greater empathy towards their clients than those who had secure attachments. Lovenheim (2008) also

noted that insecure attachments formed in childhood leave some adults better at identifying dangerous situations than their secure-based counterparts, an important skill for those working on the frontline in mental health services. Therefore, the inauthenticity necessary to survive neglectful experiences, the parentification and role taking associated with soldiering through a childhood of neglect can be considered key strategies for success in the helping professions in adulthood. However, this is not always the case.

While there are many ways in which a childhood of neglect can produce empathic, resilient, effective helping practitioners in adulthood, there are also a variety of ways in which a childhood of neglect can be a much less positive influence upon the adult professional helper. Although they documented some positive outcomes, Braunstein-Bercovitz et al. (2014) detailed that a history of childhood emotional maltreatment, such as emotional neglect, may lead mental health professionals to hold an intolerance of failure, wherein they could find it difficult to understand or accept what they consider failure on the part of those whom they are supporting. This could be a result of the sense of *being inferior*, a phenomenon experienced by many of the participants in this study. *The lingering legacy of being inferior* in childhood led many of the participants to carry shame in adulthood. It is understandable how attempts to hide this shame could lead to an intolerance of failure. Additionally, the literature posits that those who experienced neglect in childhood can also carry with them a yearning for proximity and connection with other (Finzi et al., 2002), which is supported in this study and detailed in the findings as a *yearning for love*, within *the legacy of being unloved*. The literature in this area points to a need for the professional to be liked, approved of or loved by those they work with or work for. Akin to the sense of *being inferior*, this can prompt the individual to attempt to save others in the hope of receiving love and hide the reality of their experience for fear of being stigmatised or seen as incapable professionally (Zerubavel & O'Dougherty Wright, 2012). They can place the approval of

others, such as a client or supervisor, above the responsibility of their role and, thus, avoid opportunities to challenge or question others in pursuit of growth and progress. In this light, we can see how formerly neglected professionals can be a great asset in frontline professions, however, it is also important for these professionals to be mindful of their experiences of neglect and the impacts they may have through personal reflection and attendance at clinical supervision.

A return to the frontline showcases the legacies of *being unloved*, *being inferior* and *soldiering* for each of the thirteen participants it represents. However, in researching the existing literature, studies which explore the effects of a role on the frontline on the individual who has experienced neglect or maltreatment, who has already experienced so much trauma in childhood, were difficult to unearth. Instead, the literature focuses on the impact these individuals could have on the workplace and those in it. In this way, once again, the literature neglects those who experience neglect. As adults, it considers them merely as the role they play and the influence they have as instruments for helping others in their positions as frontline workers who are tasked with difficult, sometimes dangerous duties. This, again, highlights the significance of the *soldiering* phenomenon that has been uncovered in this study.

Coming from a childhood of soldiering, the adult soldier working on the frontline of a helping profession potentially continues to play a role, remaining vigilant for signs of danger, and standing alone as a lone soldier, if needed, taking on the challenging environments and the extra shifts. The lack of focus on the adult experience of those who were neglected in childhood in both literature and practice leaves many of them still soldiering through adulthood, veterans from the frontline of neglect. However, in mourning the absence of the adult experience within the empirical literature, one must acknowledge how the lack of clarity and understanding around the experience of neglect, around its very definition, makes

it difficult for these individuals to be represented within the research landscape. For how can researchers, practitioners, workplaces, and individuals be expected to consider and respect the experiences of those who have been neglected if they don't know what it is like to be neglected, if they can't define the experience?

### **Reframing Neglect**

As explored in the literature review, defining neglect has long been a particularly difficult feat for researchers, policy makers and practitioners due to a range of issues, including research barriers, and global discrepancies in cultural perspectives, national wealth and social norms (Allen et al., 2012; Friedman & Billick, 2014). This leaves neglect often incorporated as one facet of a broader issue, such as child maltreatment, developmental trauma, or adverse childhood experiences (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016; Asmundson & Afifi, 2019; Van der Kolk, 2005). Definitions of neglect which have been offered in the empirical and practice literature are most applicable within a legal or policy development context and do not seem best suited to inform psychotherapists of the experience of neglect from the perspective of those who have lived it. These definitions usually take a similar form in explaining the action of neglect as “an omission” (Tusla, 2011, p.8), or “failure to” (HM Government, 2010, p.39), followed by the effects on the individual and then a list of the types of neglect, or vice versa. For example, the definition referenced throughout this study from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2011, p.8) defines neglect as “an omission, where the child suffers significant harm or impairment of development by being deprived of food, clothing, warmth, hygiene, intellectual stimulation, supervision and safety, attachment to and affection from adults, and/or medical care”. Similarly, in the UK, neglect has been defined as “the persistent failure to meet a child’s basic physical and /or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the

child's health or development" (HM Government, 2010, p.39), an initial definition which is followed by a list of types of neglect. In this way, the current available definitions of neglect do well to define the nature of the phenomenon, the effects and the categories, for those of us on the outside looking in. But they do not serve to uncover the experience for those who have lived it and the psychotherapists tasked with supporting them.

One of the primary objectives of this study was to privilege the experience of childhood neglect from the perspective of the adults who were neglected as children and place this experience within the broader child maltreatment literature. In order to prioritise neglect in this way, this study offers a descriptive summary of neglect as a distinct experience for the adults who were neglected as children. In offering this descriptive summary of the experience of neglect, this study seeks to consider the perspectives of psychotherapists working with those who have experienced neglect. While the formal definitions of neglect outlined above hold specific functions in policy and practice, this descriptive summary may sit alongside the formal definitions of neglect as a useful support for psychotherapists and their clients in reframing their understanding of neglect and developing insights into the experience of neglect.

From the adult survivor's perspective, childhood neglect may be understood as the persistent, emotional experience of being unloved. It can encompass an internal experience of emotional and psychological seesawing and prompt a sense of soldiering through life. The remnants of neglect may include the lived experience of being inferior to others and a sense of being confined, leaving the individual consistently yearning for escape. These experiences of neglect can endure in adulthood regardless of the types of neglect experienced or the coexistence of other forms of maltreatment in childhood. For many, neglect in



childhood leaves a lingering legacy in adulthood and has profound effects on the individual throughout the lifespan.

The aim of this descriptive summary is to give voice to the participants' experiences and highlight the unique experiences on the journey of neglect, which warrant priority in the literature and in psychotherapy practice. It is based on the common lived experiences of the participants in this study and seeks to grant psychotherapists greater insight into the experience of neglect. Based on this descriptive summary, the next focus of the discussion chapter will consider recommendations for psychotherapy practice, supervision and research.

### **Recommendations to Psychotherapy: Practice, Supervision & Research**

This study is unique in that it explores the child's experience of neglect from the perspective of the adult they have become, illuminating the lived phenomena of neglect in childhood as well as the legacy in adulthood. Therefore, it is believed the recommendations to psychotherapy should concern both psychotherapy with the neglected child and psychotherapy with the surviving adult. This section will follow a path from the descriptive summary outlined above, presenting implications for practice, supervision and research based on this new perspective on the experience of neglect.

#### ***Recommendations for Psychotherapists***

In keeping with the format of many definitions of neglect offered in the empirical literature, psychotherapeutic interventions with those who are experiencing or have experienced neglect focus primarily on the types of neglect and the symptoms. In this way, Dubowitz (2014, p.444) clarifies that many child health professionals are tasked with healing "manifestations of neglect" rather than neglect itself. These manifestations or symptoms often

include behavioural difficulties in school, peer difficulties, mental health difficulties, or a perceived lack of empathy or boundaries (DePanfilis, 2006). When we consider neglect from the perspective of the new descriptive summary offered in this chapter, we can see how, in addressing these manifestations of neglect, psychotherapists are circling neglect but not quite addressing the experience itself. In this regard, it is important for the psychotherapist to employ these symptoms, along with contributory factors, as identifiers of neglect as soon as possible. The possibility of neglect must be of consideration for the psychotherapist in the assessment stage and introductory sessions, regardless of whether the client is a child, adolescent or adult. Just as an intake sheet or client history would include medical or addiction considerations, so too should the psychotherapist be on the lookout for that which is not there, that which has not been identified. Interestingly, at interview and during the initial phone contact, several participants in this study expressed that they had spoken to their therapists frequently about abuses and traumas in their childhoods but not about what was not there, what did not happen, or the omissions in their childhood. Some participants weren't even sure what neglect was or if they had experienced it. In this light, it is imperative that the psychotherapist take the lead to identify whether neglect in childhood was or is a possibility.

Once a pattern of neglect has been identified, either currently or historically, mandatory reporting may be necessary. In the case of a child, the client may have been brought for therapy based on a social work referral, but, should this not be the case, welfare concerns should immediately be reported if evident, in line with the Children First Guidelines (2017). While social work departments are grossly overstretched and understaffed, it is important to file the concern so that, should other professionals report concerns, the accumulation of reports will prompt greater enquiry, while also ensuring that family supports and child protection can co-exist “as stages on the one pathway” (Daniel, 2015, p.18). Furthermore, voicing concern can lead to the development and inclusion of protective factors

for preventing and intervening in cases of neglect, including school-based support services, extracurricular activities, home-based family support and attendance at community groups (Khambati et al., 2018; Swenson & Chaffin, 2006). As these immediate avenues for cumulative intervention are being developed, the psychotherapist can begin to explore neglect as presented in the findings of this study, the sense of *being unloved*.

The research and practice literature in psychotherapy explores the concept of love in many ways and by many terms, including emotional support, empathic attunement and unconditional positive regard (Armstrong, 2013; Vincent, 2018). In terms of psychotherapy literature that explicitly names or addresses love in the therapeutic relationship, historically, Freud's remark that psychoanalysis is "a cure through love" (1957, p.23) and his writings on "transference-love" (Person et al., 2013, p.1) expressly detail his understanding that love in the therapeutic relationship is not only inevitable, it is an essential part of the process. In contemporary literature, Tsai et al. (2013) reference the importance of therapeutic love in functional analytic psychotherapy, and Natterson (2003, p.509) describes the very process of psychotherapy as "an actualisation of love". Green (2010, p.3) further asserts that "to create and maintain the therapeutic relationship you have to be willing to work not just with your head but, equally, with your heart... Is this a kind of love? I think it is". In considering the difference between romantic love and therapeutic love, Paul and Charura (2014, p.222-223) spoke of the Greek word "agape", often described as the highest form of love, proclaiming it as "the kind of parental love psychotherapists need to offer their clients, particularly when what they received from their own parents was insufficient to meet their needs". In all, the consensus across the therapies is that a loving relationship is imperative for client growth, provided that the therapist has the ability, training, supervision and capacity to regulate and boundary themselves (Paul & Charura, 2014).

In psychotherapy, the word *love* may not always be used openly within the therapeutic relationship. While there has been reference to it in the literature (Green, 2010; Person et al., 2013), often the languaging of love in psychotherapy can be tentative for many reasons. Firstly, the term love can, perhaps, be considered unprofessional and an attempt at a loving relationship with a client can be deemed a boundary violation. Secondly, the current climate regarding policy and practice is, understandably, cognisant of the devastating statistics regarding historical abuse in Ireland and around the world. To introduce the concept of love between someone in a professional, some might say authoritative, position and a client, be they child, adult or parent, seems unethical and naïve. Thirdly, therapeutic relationships are often transient and to introduce the concept of a loving relationship between a client and a therapist in the short-term can seem overreaching or excessive. After all, the sudden departure of a loving figure can be difficult for anyone, regardless of their background. Therefore, if this study suggests that a need for love and emotional connection is necessary for the healthy development of children and for the healing of relational trauma in adults and there is literature to support and encourage the reference to love in the therapeutic relationship, yet there are so many valid reasons not to provide love explicitly to a client, then what?

Working with a client who has experienced or is experiencing neglect, who is *yearning for love* or *being afraid of love*, can be complex. But, according to the participants in this study, the unloved experience of neglect and the need for love, which is borne of it, is deceptively simple. The experience of being unloved needs to be treated with an experience of being loved. Hopper et al.'s (2018) approach to therapeutic work with adult survivors of emotional abuse and neglect suggests that love can be a powerful force in developing a strong, therapeutic alliance. This study uncovers that, for those who have experienced neglect, love is experienced through what the individual does, what they say, and how they

accept and acknowledge the worthiness of the other. Perhaps this can be best expressed by Heidegger, who, in his writings to Hannah Arendt, defined love as “volo ut sis” meaning “I want you to be what you are” (Arendt & Heidegger, 2004, p.21). Often in the helping professions we look at techniques and programmes to support the client, when it is our acceptance, punctuality, commitment, eye contact, physical attunement, remembering of hobbies or friends’ names, and saying that we were looking forward to seeing them that carries the most weight. According to the participants in this study, it is these seemingly flowery or intangible actions that best show love to those who have been neglected of it.

It must be love, love, love,

Nothing more, nothing less,

Love is the best.

(From ‘It Must Be Love’, written by Labi Siffre, 1972, performed by  
Madness, 1981, enjoyed by Barbara)

In terms of psychotherapeutic approaches which can best facilitate a loving connection between the child client and therapist, as well as, more importantly, the child and parent, filial therapy (VanFleet, 2014), parent-child interaction therapy (Thomas & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2012) and other creative-based therapies appear the most suited to addressing the experience of being unloved with the child client, due to their clear child-focus, relational development purpose and indirect approach. Regarding the adult who was neglected in childhood, Hopper et al.’s (2019) new component-based psychotherapy approach is the therapeutic model most tailored to working with those who have experienced emotional

neglect or abuse, while, of the traditional psychotherapies, a humanistic approach seems most appropriate in addressing the lingering relational trauma for those who experienced being unloved in childhood (Vincent, 2018). Within these approaches, transference and countertransference can be applied as a framework for understanding the shadows of lingering childhood relationships in the therapeutic relationship (Bennett, 2012). But, while these approaches should act as a foundation, further avenues for intervention and reflection must be explored as, although *being unloved* encompasses an essential aspect of the experience of neglect, the findings and the descriptive summary provided in this study highlight additional experiences of neglect which need to be considered by the psychotherapist.

Seesawing is an experience of neglect which can be a suitable path for intervention in psychotherapy with children who experience neglect. Play and creative therapies can facilitate an exploration of seesawing through thematic exploration of movement, up and down and balancing, in a word, re-enacting the experience of seesawing in the therapeutic space. In this way, the child can develop an understanding of the feelings and experiences associated with seesawing in a supportive and safe environment, with the possibility of achieving some balance, both physically and psychologically, and making meaning out of the experience.

For therapeutic intervention with adults, psychotherapists must be cognisant that *seesawing* is an experience of neglect that has lingered into adulthood, rather than a chosen action or individual wrongdoing. It can best be observed in clients as extreme thoughts, behaviours or patterns, such as addiction, which have lingered following a childhood of emotional insecurity, as validated in the empirical literature (Maté, 2009). Rather than scapegoating those who fall into addiction, reframing it within the phenomenon of seesawing can support psychotherapists to better understand those who have experienced childhood

neglect and, consequently, addiction, empowering them to achieve the balance that others take for granted. However, following a lifetime of seesawing, the psychotherapist must consider that some clients who were neglected as children may exhibit a fear of balance and a need for ambiguity and seesawing. In this way, the therapist role is not to push the client to a state of balance, but to slow down and steady the seesaw, by first allowing it to slowly swing in a much less violent, more manageable and predictable manner. Transactional analysis psychotherapy (Clarkson, 2013) is one theoretical approach which may support the client to achieve this experience of balance, through identifying the client's ego states in relationships and developing new means of existing in relationships. In this way, through addressing the thoughts and behaviours associated with seesawing, along with facilitating a sense of being loved, the psychotherapist can support the client to discover internal patterns and reduce the *yearning to escape* which continues to plague those who were neglected in childhood.

A further recommendation to psychotherapists working with adolescents or adults who experienced neglect is to consider the phenomenon of *soldiering* in the initial contact stages of the therapy. Many of those who have experienced neglect exhibit a sense of being hypervigilant, untrusting or wary, as if existing as a lone soldier in battle. This can be a useful metaphor for the psychotherapist to consider in approaching the client (i.e., a therapist sitting directly across from a client, with their body positioned straight on, can be deemed threatening, or a therapist who does not explain the protocol around note taking or file storage in the initial session can be considered untrustworthy or sneaky). More than anything, however, time appears to be the factor most likely to support the soldiering client into accepting the psychotherapist as a 'friendly'. For only through fostering a committed relationship around a sense of being loved can the soldiering client begin to let their guard down.

While the approach to soldiering outlined above can also apply to working with child clients, soldiering can also be explored in an even more dynamic, experiential form in child therapy sessions. Just like seesawing, soldiering can be explored in the safety of the therapy space as a battle using toys, building forts or undertaking missions, with the client vanquishing the therapist as the enemy or taking the therapist on a journey through a warzone as their comrade. While it is important to establish clear and consistent boundaries between play or drama and reality, the creative therapies appear well suited to clients who have experienced neglect, as they allow the client to explore and make sense of their experience by bringing it to life in an accepting, boundaried space.

The final consideration for psychotherapy practitioners based on this study concerns the journey from inauthentic existence towards authenticity, which Heidegger (1996) deemed the primary endeavour of each individual. It would appear, in this study, that psychotherapeutic support has played a key role in many participants' move towards existing authentically, in that they have explored and unpicked their experience of being inauthentic in childhood, in order to survive, and, thus, achieved a growth in awareness of themselves and their engagement with their life-world, moving closer toward being authentic. Existential psychotherapy is the approach best suited to this endeavour as it considers the client's relationship with their life-world (Van Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). It reflects Heidegger's "call to conscience", encouraging the client to become aware and engage actively and authentically in their life-world (1996, p.269). Through nurturing this awareness and by fostering a sense of being loved, exploring seesawing, and respecting soldiering, we, as psychotherapists, can support those who have experienced neglect to make meaning of their experiences and move forward authentically on their journey.



### ***Recommendations for Supervision***

The implications for psychotherapy practice offered by this study also apply to the supervision of psychotherapy, in that the supervisor must ensure that neglect, its experience, indicators and areas for intervention are considered a possibility from the beginning of the supervisory relationship in the supervision of therapists with their existing clients, as well as new clients. Beyond this, psychotherapy supervisors are also often tasked with supervising not just practicing psychotherapists, but other helping professionals. Each of the thirteen participants in this study who have returned to the frontline in adulthood are engaged in some form of supervisory relationship. Therefore, this study provides recommendations for psychotherapist supervisors who may be, overtly or presumptively, working with professionals who were neglected as children.

In their role, the psychotherapy supervisor can explore aspects of the lived experience of the supervisee which may affect their work. As identified in this study, many of those who have experienced neglect in childhood can return to the frontline of trauma in adulthood. This can be most closely observed in *the lingering legacy of soldiering*. In this study, by returning to the frontline of pain and chaos one could argue that the participants are continuing to exist in the neglectful experiences of their childhoods, reflecting the psychotherapy literature on “repetition compulsion” wherein the individual continuously returns to the pain of the experience, attempting to rewrite or re-experience it (Bocock, 2003, p.73). For the supervisor, it is important to identify and illuminate when a supervisee appears to be returning to their childhood experiences in the work environment. In the selection of trainees for psychotherapy training, Mander (2004, p.166) termed this as a deciphering between “the wound and the wish”.

While the lines between supervision and personal therapy can be, at times, very clear and, at other times, blurred, this study would argue that it is important for the supervisor to

articulate to the supervisee when they appear to be working from a place of soldiering or playing out other phenomena from their childhood of neglect and, if necessary, point them in the direction of personal psychotherapy. For, while soldiering without awareness can be dangerous and cause difficulties, a supervisee who is aware of their pattern of soldiering can employ it effectively. In their research review, Zerubavel and Wright (2012) highlighted that emotional wounds, if sufficiently worked through, can improve therapeutic effectiveness in practitioners. From this perspective, one could argue that continued soldiering, for professionals who were neglected as children, can be a useful and viable action, provided they are equipped with an awareness of their experiences, appropriate supervision, supportive psychotherapy and a map toward living authentically and away from further trauma. Existential analytic supervision is one approach which can support the practitioner to engage more actively and authentically in supervision, bringing their awareness to the here and now experience of being in supervision (Glover, 2014). Developing this capacity in supervision can be empowering for the supervisee in supervision and beneficial for their engagement with those whom they work for and alongside.

### ***Recommendations for Research***

This study is the first of its kind to expressly focus on adults' experiences of neglect in childhood, giving priority to the voices and the stories of fifteen participants. Avenues for future research should include more qualitative studies which give voice to those who have experienced neglect across differing populations and with greater participant numbers. As a direct progression from this study, a study using the descriptive summary offered here could be an interesting approach, as correlations and discrepancies between this study and others could further unpick the common lived experience of childhood neglect. Also, research with children and young people would provide further rich insights into the experience of neglect

in today's world. Finally, specific studies into psychotherapeutic interventions with those who have experienced neglect are welcomed. A study which uncovers the needs and experiences of psychotherapy clients, in their own words, along with a focus on psychotherapists' understandings would be a welcome step forward.

The literature review and discussion chapter in this study have highlighted the barriers to research and the dearth of research on the topic of childhood neglect. While the resulting confusion, ethical issues and limited research histories are understandable deterrents, prevalence rates, effects, and the experience of neglect, as uncovered in this study, urge us to continue our endeavours to unpick the phenomenon of neglect and build a stronger research base around it. While the research into child neglect may not follow the linear paths of much other research, it can be unique in that the voices of those who have experienced neglect can inform the researchers, who can then return to those who have experienced it for further discussion and clarifications, with the individuals using the research to gain further insights themselves, and back and forth, like a seesaw. This iterative process may not be the most straightforward form of research, but it is necessary to give psychotherapists and other mental health professionals a considered and applicable understanding of what it is really like to experience neglect.

### **The End of the Journey**

This final section will bring us to the end of this journey through the experience of neglect. It will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the study, before sharing the researcher's final reflections and concluding remarks.

## *Study Evaluation*

One of the key strengths of this study is that it achieved the aim and objectives set out in the introduction: to gain a greater understanding of the experience of neglect and its legacy in adulthood, to contribute to the literature, to give voice to the individuals who have experienced neglect, and to support psychotherapy practice to recognise the place of neglect in the spectrum of child maltreatment. This is the most important and significant strength of this study. The study also contributes a unique voice to the field of neglect research. Using direct quotes and individual stories, it privileges the voices of those who experienced neglect as children. Thus, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach is deemed to have been the most suitable means of analysis from which to articulate the experience of neglect. I also found my psychotherapy background to be particularly effective in the interview process in encouraging and facilitating the participants to share their stories. This psychotherapy foundation was imperative throughout the study in considering ethical issues, reflexivity, respect for the participants, interpreting dialogue with the participants, and getting the lived phenomenon. Finally, one key achievement of this study is the descriptive summary of neglect it has offered to inform psychotherapy practice, rooted in the participants' lived experiences.

One limitation observed from the beginning is that each participant engaged in psychotherapy outside of the study, and thus, the outcomes of the research need to be interpreted in light of this. Psychotherapeutic support was part of the initial criteria for participation, to ensure that each participant would have previously discussed aspects of their lived experience in a therapeutic setting, rather than speaking of it for the first time in the interview. While this was mainly an ethical consideration, it became clear that a history of attending psychotherapy gave the participants an understanding of themselves and their experience to the point that they could clearly identify and articulate the maltreatment they

suffered as children. This may have led to the rich data in the findings, but the experience of attending psychotherapy may have also impacted the participants' accounts of their experiences and led to trends within the data and, subsequently, the findings, which may not have emerged had the study been conducted with individuals who had not previously engaged in psychotherapy or spoken with a professional about their childhood experiences of neglect. It may also have given voice only to those who have had the money or access to psychotherapy, further narrowing the scope of the recruitment and the overall findings. Similarly, one must consider the relationship with addiction had by nearly every participant. As addiction support is the place where most participants first encountered psychotherapy, the findings need to be interpreted in the context and characteristics of the participants. Finally, hermeneutic phenomenology can be viewed as a subjective methodology which is difficult to generalise as it prioritises the individual's experience and incorporates the researcher's experience. At times in the analysis, I was concerned that I would take interpretive leaps based on my experience rather than the data and I used academic and clinical supervision to address this. However, regardless of its limitations, hermeneutic phenomenology is still deemed the most appropriate methodology for this study's aims and objectives. This study did not seek to generalise its findings, rather it sought to give voice to one group's experiences of childhood neglect in the hope of shining light on a phenomenon that has often been left in the dark.

### ***Reflecting on the Journey***

This study has taken me on quite a journey, so much so that I had been avoiding writing this conclusion. Perhaps I was hoping it would prevent the journey from ending. There have been an array of highlights and challenges on the road to this thesis. Working as a therapist with children and young people who have experienced neglect, the work fuelled the

passion and drive to continue with each stage of the study, but, at times, it was difficult to separate the study from the work. Figuring out how to best articulate the poignant stories of the fifteen participants was an emotional, and at times stressful experience, as I wanted to do justice to the candour and trust shown by the participants who were so forthcoming with their experiences. The write up was a painstaking, yet wonderful, learning process in honing my opinions and perspectives on the topic of neglect and research in general. At each stage on the journey, continued support from invested supervisors and an encouraging peer group repeatedly put me back on the right track, helping me to find the tone of the study, to dignify the stories of the participants, and to form an identity as practitioner researcher. It has been a privilege to bring to light the voices of the fifteen participants in this study and, in endeavouring to illuminate their voices, I found mine. In following the paths of others, I have undergone my own journey, and, for that, I will be forever grateful.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

This study sought to give voice to adult participants' experiences of neglect in childhood. Through hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of fifteen interviews, several common lived experiences were uncovered within the phenomenon of neglect. The experience of neglect was revealed as one of *being unloved, being inferior, seesawing, soldiering, and yearning for love*, with each experience enduring in adulthood as *the lingering legacy of neglect*. These findings were explored in the context of existing literature, and several original findings from this study were illuminated. Finally, this study humbly offered a descriptive summary of neglect as a lived experience, voicing an experience that has, in many ways, been silenced.

People writing songs that voices never share

And no one dared

Disturb the sound of silence

(From 'The Sound of Silence', 1965, written by Paul Simon,

performed by Disturbed, 2015, shared by Kelly)

For those who will forever be known as Colm, Steven, Aoife, Peter, Dawn, Kelly, Nadine, Ben, Valerie, Grace, Áine, Barbara, Andrew, Dearbhla and Lily, the journey of neglect carries on. But at least now, in some small way, it is no longer a journey unheard or unnoticed. The final word justly goes to the participants, voices who bravely shared, as they boldly dared, to disturb the sound of silence.

I know we were never listened to. We never had a voice (Colm, p.18).

I could have done without all those years...but then I feel it brought me on my journey of where I am today (Áine, p.24).

My experience belongs to me (Grace, p.13).

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## Appendices

### Appendix A – Email to Practitioners

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

We are conducting a research study into adults' experiences of neglect in the family during their childhood. Our aim is to uncover the experience of neglect with a view to informing psychotherapy practice. Much research has been done in other areas of abuse, but research on neglect has been generally overlooked so we feel this is an important opportunity.

We ask your support in this study as you have named abuse and/or neglect as one of the areas in which you provide psychotherapy support. We are looking to interview psychotherapy clients who have experienced neglect and meet the criteria outlined below. We ask only that you inform suitable clients that the study is underway and provide them with the contact details of the principal researcher (Honor Carroll – 0860709752/ [honor.carroll6@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:honor.carroll6@mail.dcu.ie) or the attached document. This is the extent of your involvement. Potential participants are then free to contact the researchers if they wish to engage with the study.

The criteria for inclusion in the study are:

- Adults who have experienced neglect as children in the family home
- Have discussed and reported this experience to a professional in the past, perhaps a counsellor
- Between the ages of 18 and 45
- Resident in Ireland

In many cases, those who have been neglected have also experienced another form of abuse alongside it, including physical, sexual or emotional abuse. This study recognises this and welcomes participants who have experienced these abuses alongside neglect to participate. However, this study will, specially, focus on the experience of childhood neglect within the family.

Please feel free to contact the researchers on the phone number or email provided above if you require any further information.

Thank you

## Appendix B – Email Attachment

### Did you experience neglect as a child?

We are studying adults' experiences of neglect in the family during their childhood. This experience is important to us and we hope to use this study to inform professionals who are working with those who have experienced neglect.

We are looking for participants who meet the following criteria:

- Adults who experienced neglect in the family home (physical, emotional, medical or otherwise)
- Have discussed this experience with a professional in the past, perhaps a counsellor
- Between the ages of 18 and 45
- Resident in Ireland

If you meet the criteria and are willing to participate in an interview lasting 45mins – 1 hour we would be delighted to hear from you.

For further information please contact Honor Carroll on 086 0709752 or email [honor.carroll6@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:honor.carroll6@mail.dcu.ie)

## **Appendix C – Interview Schedule**

### **Socio-demographic Information**

#### **Definition of Neglect**

For the purpose of this research study, neglect is defined as causing harm to a child through depriving them of food, shelter, warmth, emotional attachment, medical care, clothing and/or hygiene.

#### **Confidentiality/Mandated Reporting**

Should you disclose any information that concerns the safety or welfare of a child, the researcher is legally obliged to report this information to Tusla.

#### **Interview Schedule**

- Can you tell me about your experience/experiences of neglect in your family when you were a child?  
Prompts: Can you tell me more about that? What was that actually like for you? How did that impact on you?
- Could you give me any examples of times when you were neglected?  
Prompts: Can you tell me more about that? What was that actually like for you? What happened to you...when....?
- What effect has the neglect you experienced as a child had on you?  
Prompts: as a child? as an adult?
- What does the experience of being neglected as a child mean to you, now?
- Is there anything that I have not asked but that you would like to tell me about your experiences?

Thank you

## Appendix D – Example of Initial Analysis

Narrative	Lived Experience
<p>N: Yeah, it was chaotic. That's what it was. That's the word I would use to describe... growing up was chaos, absolute chaos, and it's not like... You know, from the outside sometimes the house would look fine. It was tidy, food in the fridge, parents were around at least. But you just never knew. My parents would run out...if my mother said she was going to the pub it was like "alright, let's wade this one out". I used to stay awake at night and I'd wait for her until she came home. I'd wait until she'd fall asleep because it was just kind of wait and see.</p>	<p>Existing in chaos</p> <p>Being different, sense of hiding/shame</p> <p>Being watchful, sense of anticipation/the inevitable</p>
<p>H: So you'd be lying in bed awake?</p>	
<p>N: Yeah if I was in the other room I would be listening. Or I'd go in next to her just 'cause you didn't know. She could go to the bathroom and you'd think "she's been in there too fucking long". So chaos. If I had to just describe it I would say chaotic.</p>	<p>Being vigilant, taking control</p> <p>Existing in chaos</p>

H: Yeah so it was chaos and it was murky at the same time.

N: Yeah well the murky is that kind of “I love you and you’re everything and I love all of you and you’re my life” and yet you're trying to kill yourself and get out of life? Like, that's the murky kind of mixed message, very much, and I think that's why I hated her and that's why I grew to resent her because she would tell you “I love you” and it's like “yeah, but now I'm cleaning your blood up”, you know? So, I'm not sure what this is. It's not love, like.

Sense of confusion in relationship, in situation, no clarity

Being unloved, not shown love, not being enough, sense of confusion

## Appendix E – Example of Further Stage of Analysis

Yellow	Being self-sufficient, being left to care for oneself, sense of survival, sense of soldiering
Blue	Sense of unbalance, being in transition, sense of coming and going, in and out, up and down, seesawing
Light Green	Being watchful, being wary, sensing the mood, the unspoken energy, sense of soldiering
Light Blue	Sense of joy and hope, light in the darkness, sense of escaping
Light Purple	Existing in chaos, witnessing violence, sense of soldiering
Red	Sense of anger, Sense of shame, resentment, being inferior
Teal	Being insignificant, unworthy, craving love/connection, discomfort with connection, being unloved, being inferior
Forest Green	Being unsure/unaware, existing in the unknown, lack of clarity, sense of confusion, seesawing, being Unbalanced

## Appendix F – Example of a Memo

### Seesawing/ Being on a Seesaw

Seesawing refers to the experience of being constantly/chronically in a state of polarisation.

Seesawing between – being powerful and powerless, being angry and being ashamed, being present and being absent, being burdened and being free, being full and being empty.

Several interviewees often articulate the two polarities within the same breath – one does not appear to exist without the other, or if it does, the other is impending and expected at some point. In this light, the individual is constantly toing and froing between these polarities, unable to balance in between. There appears to be an exhaustion that comes with this moving back and forth which seems to be accompanied by a lack of sense of self. It is as if the individual naturally, instinctively responds from the place of A and then has to overcorrect to side B in order to adapt and survive in a world of chaos and confusion. This switching between what is instinctual and what is the most clever or acceptable response is a continuous activity. It seems that, as long as the individual continuously moves along this seesaw, existing in a transitory limbo, it is not possible to forge a clear identity rooted in any foundation.



## **Appendix G – Plain Language Statement**

### **Introduction to the Research Study**

The title of this research study is **Adults’ Lived Experiences of Neglect within the Family during their Childhood.**

The researcher is Honor Carroll, a student on the Doctorate in Psychotherapy at Dublin City University. The study is supervised by Dr Rita Glover ([rita.glover@dcu.ie](mailto:rita.glover@dcu.ie)) and Dr Mary Farrelly ([mary.farrelly@dcu.ie](mailto:mary.farrelly@dcu.ie)).

Honor Carroll can be contacted at 0860709752 or [honor.carroll6@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:honor.carroll6@mail.dcu.ie)

### **Purpose of the study**

The aim of this study is to illuminate adults’ lived experiences of neglect within the family during their childhood. For the purpose of this study, neglect is defined as causing harm to a child through depriving them of food, shelter, warmth, emotional attachment, medical care, clothing and/or hygiene. The study hopes to inform psychotherapists who work with people who have experienced neglect in childhood so that they can better support and understand their clients. It is also important for this study to give voice to the experience of those who have been neglected and bring attention to a form of abuse that has received very little attention.

### **What does participation involve?**

Participants will be asked to attend an interview at the researcher’s office at Carnegie Counselling Centre, Swords or DCU’s Healthy Living Centre, whichever is more convenient for the participant. A time and date for interview will be arranged by the researcher and

participant over the phone or by email. The interview will take approximately one hour. The interview will be audio recorded and the participant will be asked to sign a consent form before the interview starts. The interview will contain questions regarding your experience of being neglected in childhood.

### **How is privacy protected?**

In order to protect the privacy of the participants, participants names, their assigned pseudonyms and the raw interview data will all be stored separately in password encrypted files on the researcher's laptop. Any paper data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet within the researcher's home. Anonymity cannot be guaranteed but every effort will be employed to ensure it.

### **How will data be used and disposed?**

The data obtained from the interviews will be used as part of the researcher's doctoral thesis. The thesis may also be used as the basis for journal articles, presentations at conferences and workshops for practitioners.

On request, the results of the research can be sent to participants (following the conclusion of the research study). All of the raw data will be deleted and destroyed five years after the study, in line with DCU's data protection guidelines.

### **Are there any legal limitation to data confidentiality?**

The researcher is obliged to report to Tusla if a participant discloses any current or retrospective abuse or neglect of a child that meets the threshold of harm that has not been reported in the past. As per the Children First Act (2015), the researcher is a mandated person who is legally obliged to report any case in which they believe a child is currently being

harmed or at risk of being harmed. The researcher will verbally inform each participant of this protocol at the initial contact stage and at interview stage and in written form via an informed consent form.

### **Potential Benefits of taking part in this research**

This study offers you the opportunity to have your voice heard regarding the experience of being neglected in childhood. By participating in the study, you may provide an indirect benefit to a wider community, namely, others who have experienced neglect in the past or are experiencing it now.

### **Potential Risks of taking part in this research**

Partaking in an interview about the sensitive topic of childhood neglect may put participants at risk of some upset or distress. In the hope of preventing this, the interviewer will discuss the interview questions with the participant prior to the interview and the interviewer will pause the interview should the participant become upset. The participant will decide whether to continue or cease the interview.

Should a participant disclose any information that indicates that a child has been harmed or may be at risk of harm and this has not been previously reported, the researcher is legally obliged to report this information to Tusla. In this case, the participant's confidentiality and anonymity would be at risk. In order to address this possibility, the researcher will verbally inform each participant of this protocol at the initial contact stage and at interview stage and in written form via an informed consent form.

### **Do I have the right to withdraw from this study?**

The choice to participate in this study is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any point up to the point of data analysis.

**How will I find out what happens with the project?**

The findings of the research will be made available to participants on request.

**If you have a query regarding this study:**

Please feel free to contact Honor Carroll at [honor.carroll6@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:honor.carroll6@mail.dcu.ie) or on the dedicated research phone number 086 0709752.

**If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:**

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000

## Appendix H – Informed Consent Form

This Research Study is entitled ‘Adults’ Lived Experiences of Neglect within the Family during their Childhood’. The principal researcher and interviewer is Honor Carroll ([honor.carroll6@mail.dcu.ie](mailto:honor.carroll6@mail.dcu.ie)), a student on the Doctorate in Psychotherapy at Dublin City University. The study is supervised by Dr Rita Glover ([rita.glover@dcu.ie](mailto:rita.glover@dcu.ie)) and Dr Mary Farrelly ([mary.farrelly@dcu.ie](mailto:mary.farrelly@dcu.ie)).

The aim of this study is to illuminate adults’ lived experiences of neglect within the family during their childhood. The study hopes to inform psychotherapists who work with people who have experienced neglect in childhood so that they can better support and understand their clients.

In agreeing to participate in this study I am aware that I will be asked to participate in an interview regarding my experience of being neglected in childhood and I will be asked questions that pertain to the experience. For the purpose of this study, neglect is defined as causing harm to a child through depriving them of food, shelter, warmth, emotional attachment, medical care, clothing and/or hygiene.

Please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each statement):

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	Yes/No
I understand the information provided	Yes/No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study	Yes/No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	Yes/No
I am aware that my interview will be audio-taped	Yes/No

I am aware that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the research at any point.

The data I provide in this interview will be kept securely by the researcher, my name will be obscured and my contact details will be kept separately from the data for confidentiality and to respect my anonymity. I am also aware of the limits of confidentiality, particularly regarding child protection. Should I disclose any information that would be deemed a child protection concern, I am aware that the researcher is mandated to report this information to the Tusla Child and Family Agency if this has not already been done so.

I understand that all information that is collected will be retained by the researcher for five years. All information will then be destroyed, as per DCU data protection guidelines.

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researcher and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participants Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name in Block Capitals: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix I – Letter for Debriefing Session



**HLC** Healthy Living  
Centre

18<sup>th</sup> June 2018

To whom it may concern,

The HLC, DCU has given consent for Honor Carroll to use a therapy room to conduct her research interviews. The HLC will also arrange for one free debriefing session for participants with an experienced member of the psychotherapy team, if requested.

Yours Sincerely,

Catherine Timmins  
HLC Service Coordinator

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