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PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENTS OF NEGLECT IN CHILD SELF-CARE  
(LATCHKEY) ARRANGEMENTS: A FIELD EXPERIMENT

*The University of North Carolina at Greensboro*

Ph.D. 1985

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PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENTS OF NEGLECT IN CHILD

SELF-CARE (LATCHKEY) ARRANGEMENTS:

A FIELD EXPERIMENT

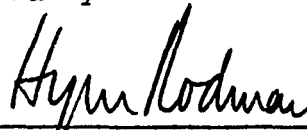
by

Henry Otten

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of the Graduate School at  
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Approved by

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Hym Rodman", is written over a horizontal line.

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APPROVAL PAGE

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One hundred eighty child protection workers participated in a field experiment to investigate the effects of selected characteristics of self-care (latchkey) arrangements on professional judgments of neglect. Two independent variables, age of child and amount of time alone, were tested. Five levels of age and four levels of time alone were systematically combined in 20 authentic vignettes representing reports of suspected child neglect. The vignettes were randomly presented to the subjects for their judgment.

Five referents for neglect judgments were selected and measured on 10-point rating scales. The dependent variables were (a) the level of agency intervention that the subjects would expect to occur in response to the report under a narrow interpretation of the child protection law, (b) the level of agency intervention that they thought most protective services workers would choose, (c) the level of agency intervention that they thought ought to be chosen, (d) their judgments of the seriousness of the situation, and (e) their judgments of the priority that the child protection agency should give the situation.

Two principal hypotheses were tested for each of the five dependent variables. They were (a) that variation in the age of the self-care child will have an inverse effect

on neglect judgments, and (b) that variation in the amount of time the child is left alone will have a direct effect on neglect judgments. The 10 hypotheses were tested using a 4 x 5 ANOVA procedure, followed by Tukey's honestly significant difference multiple group comparison test. The findings clearly supported each of the hypotheses. In addition, some interesting interaction effects between age of child and time alone on neglect judgments were found. The effect of each factor on professional judgments of neglect was found to depend on the specific level of the other factor.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

More than 600,000 reports of suspected child abuse and neglect are handled each year by the child protection agencies in the United States. Lack of supervision, a subcategory of child neglect, accounted for 21% of all confirmed child maltreatment in 1980 (USDHHS, 1980, 1983). Davidson (1984) reported that the average age of a child in such a case is 6.73 years. He noted that once a case is opened on a family where serious supervision problems involving such a young child have been documented, the family may find that the child protective services agency is involved in their lives for many years. Davidson commented that this intervention has high economic costs for the community, and, more importantly, seriously high emotional costs for the families involved. Yet little is known about the characteristics of these children and families, or about the professional judgments that underlie the decision to initiate state intervention into their lives (see Stein, Gambrill, & Wiltse, 1978).

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the influence of selected characteristics of unsupervised children and their situation on professional judgments of neglect. The research questions were the following:

1. Does the age of the child who is left alone influence professional judgments of neglect?
2. Does the amount of time a child is left alone influence professional judgments of neglect?

A nonrandom sample comprising child protective services professionals in North Carolina was asked to respond to 20 carefully crafted, mock reports of suspected child maltreatment due to lack of supervision. Two factors, age of child and amount of time left alone, were presented to the subjects in a completely randomized 4 x 5 factorial experimental design. Analysis of variance was used to test statistically the influence of the experimental factors on the professionals' judgments of neglect as measured on five 10-point scales.

Both factors were found to have a strong, unidirectional effect on professional judgments of seriousness of neglect in self-care situations. In general, the younger the child, the more severe were the neglect judgments received, and the greater the amount of time the child was alone, the more severe were the neglect judgments. The age of the child influenced professional judgments of neglect more than did the amount of time alone. The influence of the age factor was moderated by the time alone factor, however. It appears that many protective services workers do not judge the self-care arrangement for school-age children as neglect but do judge similar arrangements for preschoolers more severely.



The findings of this study add to the small but growing body of scientific knowledge about the status and condition of children who are in self-care as a type of child care arrangement. Child self-care is the child care plan of choice for many employed parents. Emlen (1982), for example, surveyed the employees of three large corporations in Washington, DC. Employees who had children were asked questions about how the demands of childrearing affected their job performance. Emlen found that 34% of the parents surveyed, the largest subgroup in his sample, used self-care as their primary child-care arrangement. While this involved the older children in the sample (their average age was 13.6 years), Emlen demonstrated that self-care is not an unusual choice of care arrangements nor is it used exclusively by low-income and single-parent families. At present, however, no child protection legislation in the various states exempts children less than 18 years old from the definition of neglect due to lack of supervision simply because they may be receiving indirect parental supervision under planned self-care arrangements. On the other hand, no statutes were found that qualified the term "supervision" other than that it must be "proper" or "adequate."

The self-care children in Emlen's sample were about 13 years old. Other researchers have found even younger children in self-care (e.g., Long & Long, 1982; Rodman,

Pratto, & Nelson, in press; Stewart, 1981). Under a narrow interpretation of the child protection laws, these children could be classified as neglected. As a practical matter, however, protective workers may exercise judgment and discretion when reports of unsupervised children are received. It is important to discover where the lines are drawn between neglect and nonneglect, and why. This research is an experimental study of these issues. The findings will help to clarify the current debate in the family field about child self-care.

There are two research strategies in this area of interest. In one, empirical investigations have been made into the effects on children of mother absence due to maternal employment (e.g., Galambos & Garbarino, 1983; Long & Long, 1982; Woods, 1972). In the other, the focus of research has been on the differences between children in self-care arrangements and children in adult-care arrangements (e.g., Rodman et al., in press; Stewart, 1981). In the first, or "mother absence," strategy, self-care is accepted as a proxy variable for maternal employment. In the second, or "self-care," strategy, maternal employment is assumed to be one of several possible factors underlying self-care. No immediate inferences are made about the lack or adequacy of supervision from the simple fact of parental absence, however.

There is a characteristic semantic confusion in the literature that requires clarification. It is currently popular to refer to children in self-care as "latchkey children." The modal definition of "latchkey child" includes certain standard elements: the child is alone before or after school, mother absence is due to maternal employment, the child carries its own housekey (preferably tied around its neck by a cord or ribbon), and the child is likely to experience severe emotional trauma. The implication is that the child is, by definition, alone against its will, inexpertly prepared for the experience, and unprotected. Rodman, Pratto, and Nelson (in press), however, assert that the terms "latchkey child" and "unsupervised child" are unnecessarily pejorative and, in fact, inaccurate. Citing earlier studies, they claim that

most parents prepare their children for the self-care arrangement, have rules for the children to follow, maintain daily telephone contact with them, and appear to do a good job of supervising their children in absentia. (Rodman, Pratto, & Nelson, in press)

The terms "self-care," "child self-care," and "self-care child" will be used in this paper to denote children who, alone or with siblings, are left to care for themselves for all or any part of the day or night. Self-care may be a daily occurrence for the child or it may be used only occasionally. In the present context, self-care does not refer to the personal care requirements of physically and mentally handicapped children, although these requirements

might be included among a particular self-care child's needs. Some of the studies reviewed for this study will refer to "latchkey" children, however, and in those instances the original author's usage has been preserved.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Extent of Self-Care

There is consensus in the field that few firm statistics are available to describe the extent of child self-care (Huff, 1982; Long & Long, 1982; Stewart, 1981; Turkington, 1983). Most researchers extrapolate from reports published by the Census Bureau and Labor Department that break down the population of working mothers by age and sex of child.

For example, a 1976 Census Bureau estimate is often quoted that 13% to 15% of children aged 7-13 whose mothers worked outside the home cared for themselves and, in some instances, for younger siblings as well (see Galambos & Garbarino, 1983). Stewart (1981), however, found that her sample of third grade self-care children represented 55% of all third graders who were in some kind of child-care arrangement. Her sample of fifth-grade self-care children represented 76.3% of fifth graders in all types of child care arrangements.

One of the first systematic attempts to measure the extent of the phenomenon and to explore the characteristics of self-care children and their families was reported by Rodman and Pratto (Rodman & Pratto, 1980a, 1980b). A magazine questionnaire was used to survey mothers of children who care for themselves when parents are away from home

(Rodman, 1980). A nonrepresentative sample of approximately 1200 mothers from all 50 states responded.

Rodman and Pratto found that, in their sample, 67% of the children cared for themselves during afternoon hours, 13% in the morning, 7% in the evening, and 13% during more than one time period. They found that the age of the children and characteristics of the mothers most strongly influence self-care practice (Rodman & Pratto, 1980b).

### Effects of Self-Care

Much of what is believed about the developmental effects of child self-care has been generalized from the results of the early maternal deprivation literature and studies of the effects of maternal employment (Rodman, Pratto, & Nelson, in press). Garbarino (1980) identified four types of risks associated with "latchkey children": they will feel badly (e.g., rejection and alienation); they will act badly (e.g., delinquency and vandalism); they will develop badly (e.g., academic failure); and they will be treated badly (e.g., accidents and sexual victimization). A review of the research literature uncovered little empirical evidence to support Garbarino's hypotheses, however. Five studies were located. They are of uneven quality but at this time define what is known about the extent and effects of child self-care. The preponderance of evidence is that, on many generally accepted measures of developmental progress, children in self-care fare neither better nor worse than children in adult care. The studies are compared in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of Five Studies of Children in Self-Care

Study	Study Population	Antecedent Variables	Outcome Variables	Outcome Measures	Findings
Woods, 1972	Black, fifth-grade students in an inner-city school in Philadelphia, PA	Child's mother is employed. Child is supervised by someone 18 or older. Child is unsupervised (or supervised by someone under 18)	Achievement Intelligence Personal adjustment Social adjustment Health Family relationships School behavior Community behavior	Standardized tests School records Hospital records Court records Intensive interviews with mothers	Unsupervised girls exhibit deficits in school achievement and IQ
Stewart, 1981	Third- and fifth-graders in one school in S.C.	Type of care arrangement when child is not in school.	Parent satisfaction with self-care arrangement Child satisfaction with self-care arrangement	Self-administered parent questionnaire	Parents are generally satisfied with self-care arrangement, especially if the care arrangement has been chosen voluntarily. Children are somewhat less satisfied but not significantly so.
Long & Long, 1982	Students in an all-black, urban, parochial elementary school in Washington, DC	Child is left at home after school without adult supervision Child is regularly supervised by an adult after school	Importance of keys Nature of parental instructions Chores Domestic routines Outside play Having friends over Illness Summertime and holidays Fears Pets TV Relationship with parents	"Semi-structured" interviews	30% of the children who are left alone report "high levels of fear"

Table 1 (continued)

Study	Study Population	Antecedent Variables	Outcome Variables	Outcome Measures	Findings
Galambos and Garbarino, 1983	Fifth and seventh graders in a rural school in N.Y. state	Child's mother is employed Child is unsupervised before and after school Child is supervised by adult before and after school	School adjustment Academic achievement Orientation to the classroom Fear of going outdoors alone	Standardized tests Self-administered child questionnaire	Self-care children are no more or less socially and academically adjusted or fearful than are children in adult care
Rodman, Pratto, and Nelson (in press)	Fourth and seventh graders representative of one county-wide school system in N.C.	Children who were alone before or after school Children who were with a parent or grandparent after school	Self-esteem Locus of control Social adjustment Interpersonal relationships	Standardized tests Structured child interviews	No statistically significant differences between matched pairs of self-care and adult-care children on any outcome measure.



Some researchers have reported findings that indicate self-care children are not doing well, especially psychologically. Long and Long (1982) concluded that "fear development should constitute a major area of concern for the parents and guardians of latchkey children." They presented as evidence the results of a study of the nature of the latchkey experience from the child's perspective (Long & Long, 1982). Fifty-three children who were routinely left alone at home after school and 32 children who were regularly supervised by an adult after school were interviewed. The question of fear was approached from four directions: (a) the child's expressed fears, (b) recurrent bad dreams or nightmares, (c) expressed methods of coping with fears, and (d) a general impression of the child's fear as rated by the interviewer.

Thirty percent (11) of the children who were regularly alone reported "high levels of fear about staying home alone." Forty percent of the group reported recurring nightmares. Their bad dreams were usually associated with something they had seen on television or were about being chased.

The interviewers rated 38% (14) of the children as demonstrating "high levels" of fear. Long and Long reported that fear responses for those latchkey children who were being cared for by a sibling were notably less than for children who were at home alone. None of the children in the adult care group were classified in the high-fear category.

Long and Long found that the number of reported fears and nightmares was less for those children who reported they perceived their relationship with one or both parents as being close.

To measure the quality of the children's relationships with their parents, Long and Long asked several questions about who cooked the meals; the whereabouts of an absent parent; the frequency of visits with the parent and the child's feelings about both the parent and/or absent parent; activities in which both the child and either parent participated; what the child liked doing with his or her parents, and the frequency of this interaction. Children were also asked how they thought their parents felt about them; how the child knew the parents felt this way; and whom the child usually went to for help when he or she had a problem. Interviewers were asked to rate the quality of the relationship they felt the child had with a primary adult. (Long & Long, 1982, p. 15)

The children appeared to feel closer to their parents when they shared a number of activities. Therefore, Long and Long concluded that parents should plan to spend as much time as possible interacting with the latchkey child and expressing concern while they are at home so that the child's fear responses will be lessened when the child is alone.

Long and Long reported that the comparison group of adult-care children were randomly selected from the same all-black, urban parochial school in which the self-care and sibling-care children were found. No data were reported on how well the groups compared on subject variables. The validity of the "fear" and "parental relationship" measures

was not demonstrated. Reliability measures were not reported for the judgments of "fear" and "closeness to parent" made by the interviewer-raters. No inferential statistics are reported to qualify the reported differences between groups of children on the outcome variables of greatest practical and theoretical interest.

Long and Long identified black, inner-city, elementary students as a group who may be especially likely to experience the self-care situation as stressful, however. This is an area that should receive systematic investigation in future research.

In a 1972 report of research on a similar population Woods found some differences related to the sex of the child (Woods, 1972). Woods focused on lack of supervision as a secondary, or derived, aspect of maternal employment (Woods, 1972). Her subjects were 108 fifth graders attending a black ghetto school in North Philadelphia. Sixty-one reported that they were supervised by mature individuals (18 years old or older) during the critical periods of the school day (during breakfast, lunch hour, and after school until dinner) and during the summer vacation; 47 reported that they were unsupervised during all or some of those periods. Multiple measures were taken of the child's achievement, intelligence, personal and social adjustment, health, family relationships, school and community behavior. Thirty-eight of the mothers of children in the study also consented to be interviewed in some

depth. These interviews were rated and relationships between mother variables and child outcome variables were analyzed. Data obtained from the children indicated significant differences between supervised and unsupervised girls. Unsupervised girls exhibited deficits in school achievement and IQ as well as some difficulty in school relations. They also saw their mothers as being less controlling and intrusive than supervised girls did. Significantly more girls than boys reported a lack of supervision. Woods reported that the data from interviews with the employed mothers of these children indicated significant association between full-time maternal employment and successful outcomes on the dependent measures for the children. Full-time maternal employment appeared to be a positive condition for the development of these children.

Woods' study is important in that it is one of the first to single out self-care as a real-life child-care alternative. In her study, lack of supervision really meant lack of adult supervision. There is some indication in the literature (Long & Long, 1983) that children who are regularly alone may differ in some important ways both from children who are with older siblings and children who are regularly supervised by adults. Basically, Woods employed supervision, or the lack of it, as a moderating variable for the effects of mother absence due to maternal employment. She did not include within the scope of her study children who are left alone for other reasons. Woods' extensive analysis of the influence of mother variables on developmental outcomes for

children, while generating some interesting and statistically significant associations with respect to unsupervised children, deals primarily with effects of maternal employment, not child self-care as such.

There was a statistically defined cluster of maternal interview rating scale items that Woods did not discuss but which she called "Father Care." In light of Galambos and Garbarino's suggestion that research on the effects of self-care should broaden its focus to include more ecological variables, the impact of father care on the developmental outcomes of the unsupervised child is important and worthy of specific study (Galambos & Garbarino, 1983).

School adjustment, classroom orientation, academic achievement, and fear of going outdoors alone were the dimensions on which Galambos and Garbarino (1983) compared children who were either supervised or unsupervised before or after school. They found no significant differences between the groups of children on any of the outcome measures. Their subjects were 77 fifth and seventh graders in a rural school (39 were in the fifth and 38 in the seventh grades). The children were grouped according to their before or after school care arrangement, as reported by the children's parents. The so-called "latchkey" group consisted of 21 children who were regularly unsupervised before or after school and whose mothers were employed outside the home. There were two comparison groups. One was made up of 29 children

whose mothers were employed but who received continual adult supervision. The third group was made up of 27 randomly selected children who were continually supervised by a non-employed mother. The groups were similar on socioeconomic variables, parents' education, and maternal employment history.

Four dependent measures were taken. Each child's teacher completed the "AML Behavior Rating Scale," a measure of school adjustment, for each child. All the children completed a scale measuring intrinsic vs. extrinsic orientation in the classroom and, at the same time, answered a question designed to determine the extent to which they feared going outdoors alone. The children had taken the "Stanford Achievement Test" earlier in the school year and total Reading and total Math scores were accepted as measures of academic achievement.

Galambos and Garbarino reported that the seventh graders seemed to be better adjusted and more intrinsically oriented than the fifth graders. The girls in their groups were found to be more curious in their classroom orientation and more fearful than boys. Boys scored higher on the internal criteria classroom orientation scale, however. The investigators found no main effects or interactions for either group. Each of the dependent variables was regressed on the background variables age, sex, income, single vs. two-parent family composition, and mother's employment status. The

authors reported that "few significant predictors were found" but did not elaborate.

Some researchers have found that the effects of child self-care are mediated by the degree to which the parent and child feel they had a choice between alternative types of child care. An exploratory study is reported by Stewart (1981) in which data from a sample of self-care children and their parents were used to address four questions:

1. What is the extent of self-care arrangements among a population of third- and fifth-grade children?
2. How satisfied are parents and children with self-care arrangements for the children?
3. Are there significant differences between levels of satisfaction for parents and children?
4. What are the variables that contribute to satisfaction for parents and children? (p. 2)

A self-care arrangement was defined as a child care arrangement in which the child was left alone or with a sibling 17 years old or younger.

Parents of 33 third-grade students and parents of 58 fifth-grade students in one public school returned questionnaires identifying their children as self-care children. This represented approximately 14% of all third-grade students in the school and approximately 23% of all fifth-grade students.

Satisfaction with self-care for both parents and children was measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = very satisfied to 5 = very dissatisfied.

Five independent variables were selected: (a) amount of time spent in self-care per week; (b) sex of child; (c) grade level; (d) presence of sibling; and (e) voluntary or involuntary use of self-care (defined as whether parents chose self-care arrangements because they or their child preferred this type of care or because cost or convenience or something else forced the choice upon them).

Stewart concluded that, for this population, the use of self-care arrangements was more frequent than in 1974. She based her conclusion on a comparison of data from her sample with available estimates of national rates of utilization. Stewart found that the children's parents were generally satisfied with the self-care arrangements for their children, a finding mediated to some degree by whether or not the parent voluntarily chose it. The children, however, were generally less satisfied with their care arrangements, but not significantly so. When asked to indicate the type of care arrangement they would prefer from an array of five possible choices, third graders chose staying with friends over self-care 2 to 1. Fifth graders reversed the order. This indicates that fifth graders, who are probably about 10 years old, may be more self-confident than younger children and less likely to be stressed by being alone.

Stewart found that the children reported most frequently that the most unpleasant aspects of self-care were sibling fights and fear of strangers calling or coming to the door.



On the other hand, most of the children enjoyed being alone and being on their own.

Rodman, Pratto, and Nelson (in press) found no statistically significant differences between matched pairs of self-care and adult-care children on measures of self-esteem, locus of control, social adjustment in the classroom, and interpersonal relationships.

Data to assess the impact of the self-care arrangement of school-age children on selected dimensions of social and psychological functioning were taken from 26 matched pairs of fourth graders and 22 matched pairs of seventh graders. Children were matched on age, sex, race, family composition (one vs. two parent families), and social status (using father's occupation as the major indicator). The children were enrolled in two elementary and two junior high schools in a consolidated, county-wide school system in central North Carolina. The schools were selected to maximize urban-rural differences in the county.

Children in self-care were those who reported that either no one was typically at home when they returned after school, or a younger sibling was the only other person at home. Children who said that their mother, father, or a grandparent was at home after school were classified as adult-care children.

The children were personally interviewed at their schools. The interview schedule was designed to obtain demographic

data as well as information about who was home with the child during the hours before and after school. The Cooper-Smith Self-Esteem Inventory and the Nowicki and Strickland Personal Reaction Survey were completed by each child. The latter measures the child's perceived locus of control over positive and negative reinforcements. Both of these measures correlate well with such measures as school achievement and positive classroom behavior. Each child's homeroom teacher also completed a Behavior Rating Form as a measure of social adjustment and interpersonal relationships. Finally, each child was asked for the number of days in the last five school days, before and after school, that each parent was at home. The investigators found that parents of self-care children were away from home more frequently than parents of adult-care children. On the dependent measures, however, the children evidenced no significant differences either within or between age groups.

#### Studies of Professional Judgment

In light of the central place of judgments in the social work process, it is surprising that so little is known about them or the factors that affect them. "The social work process can be viewed as a succession of judgments made by the social worker" (Briar, 1961). In every setting, the social worker is continually assessing the

practice situation, making judgments about and attributing meaning to what is seen and heard, predicting the other's behavior, choosing among possible responses, and estimating the probable effects of those responses in both the near and long term. For example, in the mental health setting, the quality of social worker judgments may have life or death implications, especially in assessing the client's potential harmfulness to self or others. The worker in child welfare, who may have to decide whether to remove a child from its home, is making judgments of crucial significance to the persons involved.

Stein, Gambrill, and Wiltse (1978) reviewed current research on factors related to social workers' decisions to place children in out-of-home care. They found that the research knowledge about social workers' decision-making was inconclusive and ambiguous. They concluded that one explanation for the large numbers of children who have drifted in foster care is the absence of clear guidelines for consistent case assessment, planning, and follow-up.

In an earlier review, Mech (1970) concluded that, while social work is a decision-making enterprise, its practitioners have no scientifically acceptable tools for making decisions. He concluded that "administrators, practitioners, researchers and funding groups have not demonstrated serious intent to improve decision systems in foster care" (Mech, 1970, p. 28). He advocated closer analysis of professional decision-making

and suggested an approach that could lead to better practice and more useful theory.

Studies of the processes underlying social worker judgments and decisions have had to overcome two difficult design problems. First, the researcher has had to select dependent measures that are reliable without at the same time so oversimplifying the conditions of actual social work practice that the study loses validity. Second, the number and variety of variables that could conceivably have some effect on professional judgments are so great that a major strategic problem is the selection and isolation of the most interesting and crucial ones for study. The interrelatedness of both of these concerns further complicates the problem. In an attempt to control as much as possible for the effects of extraneous variables, the researcher may attempt a typical laboratory experiment, a situation that is far removed from the conditions of actual practice. On the other hand, attempts to recreate the conditions of everyday social work activity in the laboratory risk the introduction of too many uncontrolled variables and a loss of precision in the interpretation of any relationships or effects that may appear in the data (Briar, 1961). Contemporary researchers are equipped with flexible analytical tools, including modern computer technology and multivariate statistical techniques, that help to overcome the threats to validity that Briar described. The research reports that were reviewed for this study were

done without sophisticated data analysis. The analyses of data were typically bivariate. The most complex procedure reported was a factor analysis. These studies are inherently interesting, address issues that have practical implications for social workers, and are relevant to the present research on professional judgments of neglect.

Studies of professional judgment have often focused on decision-making in foster care. Briar (1963) reported a field experiment testing the effects of selected family variables on workers' choices of institutional or foster home placements for children. His subjects were 43 social workers employed in five child-placing agencies. Three were residential treatment centers with small foster family home programs. The fourth was a sectarian family service agency with a large foster family program. The fifth agency was a large public child welfare program in which almost all the children were placed in foster homes. A posttest only control-group experimental design was used in the study. The experimental variables were degree of emotional disturbance of the child and parents' attitude toward type of care. The subjects were given detailed summaries (vignettes) of three cases requiring out-of-home care. Each described a 10-year-old boy who had been in foster care before and who had been referred for placement by the court. The first case was prepared in two versions. In one, the child was described in ways consistent with a diagnosis of severe emotional disturbance.

In the second version, he was described as moderately disturbed. Briar hypothesized that the social workers would more frequently recommend institutional care for the seriously disturbed child and foster home care for the moderately disturbed child. The second case was also written in two versions. In one, the child's mother was strongly opposed to foster family care and in the other to institutional care. Briar hypothesized that worker judgments would follow parental preferences. The third case was prepared in one version and served as a control.

In each case, the subjects completed a clinical inventory that asked them to rate (a) the child's social adjustment, (b) the degree of emotional disturbance in the child, (c) the father-child and mother-child relationships on healthy-unhealthy scales, (d) the child's ability to accept foster home placement, (e) the child's ability to accept institutional placement, (f) the acceptability of foster home placement and institutional placement to the child's parents, (g) the prognosis for foster home placement or institutional placement for the child rated on a scale from "very beneficial" to "very detrimental," (h) the possibility of the child's returning to his own home, and (i) the ease or difficulty of liking the child. The workers were also asked which placement type they would ideally recommend, foster home care or institutional care for the child, and the degree of confidence they felt in their recommendations.

The vignettes were assigned randomly to the workers by agency. Data were analyzed by bivariate statistics for each case. There were no systematic differences between the scores of the two groups on the control case. No association was found between emotional disturbance and placement recommendation. Foster home placement was recommended by approximately 55% of each group. The hypothesized relationships did emerge, however, when only the scores of those who placed the child at an extreme position on the emotional disturbance scale were analyzed.

Briar also found that workers' recommendations were influenced by parental preference, especially if the mother was opposed to foster family care.

Briar's study is interesting and demonstrates a way in which vignette analysis was used to investigate the processes underlying professional judgments in placement decisions. Vignette analysis assumes that the investigator has a priori knowledge of the situation about which subjects will be asked to make judgments and can select relevant variables for study (Rossi, 1979). Some reviewers have questioned whether Briar's selection of degree of disturbance and parental attitudes was valid, especially in light of the hypothesized relationships (Fanshel, 1963). Briar's sole reliance on bivariate statistical techniques limited his findings. He could not test directly for interaction between the experimental variables, nor could he introduce additional

variability, as he might have in a factorial experimental design. Overall, Briar demonstrated an effective solution to the design problems that he himself had identified.

Vignettes were also used by Boehm (1962, 1964, 1970) to study the community's definition of neglect and its willingness to sanction protective interventions. One phase of a three-phase program of research undertaken for the Minnesota Department of Public Welfare, her design, appropriately modified to permit multivariate analyses, still serves as a potential model for the investigation of contemporary child abuse and neglect issues such as emotional abuse and child self-care.

Subjects were selected by stratified sampling from among the community groups who played a significant role in the referral and disposition of abuse and neglect cases, as well as legislators and agency board members. The subjects were presented with vignettes of situations that were typical of the ones referred for protective services. Three types of situations were described: (a) those in which physical neglect or abuse had occurred, (b) those in which emotional neglect was evident in the child's behavior or in disturbed parent-child interaction, and (c) those in which no child mistreatment had occurred but in which the parents' behavior was unconventional by then prevailing community standards.

Boehm reported that clear patterns of response were found. Most respondents agreed that strong agency



intervention was appropriate in situations where physical harm to the child had occurred. There was less general agreement with protective action in response to emotional abuse although there was agreement that it created a serious situation. Least support for protective intervention was given with respect to the situation in which the parents' behavior was somehow deviant or unconventional.

During the second phase of the project, Boehm went directly to the case records of current intake in protective services to find out what the actual characteristics were of families who were being referred for protective services. Compared to actual population proportions, poor families and ethnic minority families, as well as single-parent families, were over-represented in the sample. Boehm speculated that, while these families may be experiencing the kinds of social and financial stress that contributes to abuse and neglect, social bias may also be at work in the process of case identification by the community.

In the third phase, Boehm focused on the placement decisions that protective workers made. Data were secured from 200 active neglect cases: 100 who were placed away from their families after the study began, and 100 who became active during the same period but who were receiving in-home services. The same social workers were involved with both groups and the groups were matched as closely as possible by age and sex of child. The workers were asked

to rate the nonplacement families' functioning as either "reasonably adequate" or "marginal."

Boehm demonstrated that worker judgments of family adequacy were governed by a few general principles. Working from an original list of approximately 2500 behavioral items submitted by protective workers and based on their experience with families in their caseloads, Boehm used the Q-sort technique and factor analysis to define 12 behavioral dimensions used by the workers in assessing their cases. Four of the factors lay on a dimension of paternal behaviors and four on a maternal behaviors dimension. There were two factors relating to child's behavior and one each for household management and family's insight into problems.

The placement and nonplacement families were compared on the behavioral factors. The two groups were distinguished by the fact that placement families had a significantly lower score on the maternal behavior factor than did the nonplacement families.

Boehm's study of how community elites and agents of social control define child neglect received partial replication and was extended to a broader population by Garrett and Rossi (1978). Garrett and Rossi sought to clarify the types of acts toward children which the general population would judge as serious abuse. They were also interested in determining the ways in which the more specific features of an abuse incident influence assessments of the seriousness

of the incident. A related concern was the question whether characteristics of the individuals involved in the reported incident affect individual judgments of the seriousness of the act. Garrett and Rossi also investigated the converse effects and looked at the relationships between the characteristics of the judges themselves and their judgments of the seriousness of reported abuse.

The Garrett and Rossi study was done in a "factorial survey research design." This design was invented by Rossi and is a refinement of the vignette analysis method mentioned earlier. A computer program was written that drew randomly from researcher-created libraries of specific descriptors of characteristics of adult-child interactions. These statements were combined mechanically into brief vignettes and typed by the computer on blank cards. Four characteristics were chosen which would be most readily observable in the first contact with a possible child abuse or neglect incident. These became the independent variables, or factors, in the design. The four chosen were (a) an act involving a guardian and a child, (b) a description of the child and guardian, (c) the occupation of the main breadwinner, and (d) the ethnic composition of the hypothetical family.

The Garrett and Rossi sample was a stratified subsample of a larger household sample participating in a metropolitan area survey. Three hundred one adults, evenly divided by sex, provided ratings of seriousness of abuse for 60 vignettes that had been randomly drawn from the computer-generated

vignette library, plus four standard vignettes that were rated by each subject. The subjects were asked to rank the vignettes on a 9-point scale of seriousness. Background information was also collected from each subject in the course of the interview.

The overall seriousness rating for all vignettes was 6.7, indicating that the subjects tended to give high ratings. The average score for the four standard vignettes was 6.3. To assess the influence that vignette components had on subjects' judgments, Garrett and Rossi regressed the ratings assigned to the vignettes on the vignette characteristics themselves, the unit of analysis being the individual vignette (1978, p. 10). An "index of seriousness" score was computed for each act by calculating the average of all ratings received by the vignettes that included that act. The acts were then rank-ordered in terms of average seriousness scores. The degree of consensus among subjects with regard to the perceived seriousness of an act was reflected in the standard deviation associated with the average seriousness score. Garrett and Rossi found greater consensus among raters for those acts that were considered more serious and more disagreement for acts considered less serious.

The other characteristics of the vignettes were introduced into regression equations to assess the added explanatory power of each for the seriousness scores.

Garrett and Rossi found that the vignette components alone explained roughly 15% of the variance in seriousness scores. The act itself and its consequences for the child had the strongest influence on subjects' judgments of seriousness. Judgments were also affected by the age of the child described in the vignette and the statements describing the child and the adult who were involved in the incident.

Analysis of the effects of subject characteristics on seriousness scores was particularly interesting. Regression models of analysis of the background variables taken alone accounted for approximately 14% of the variance in seriousness scores. Demographic characteristics were found to have a significant influence on subjects' tendencies to rank cases as being, in general, more or less serious. Subjects who tended to rank incidents as less serious were generally male, white, more educated, living in high prestige families, and in families with more children. Those who assigned rankings at the more serious end of the scale were typically female and married.

Garrett and Rossi concluded that there is an underlying normative structure regarding child abuse and neglect and that, where judgments of seriousness of abuse are possible, considerable consensus is found between judges. The individual characteristics of the judges were also important and appeared to have an equal or greater role in determining

seriousness ratings in comparison to the characteristics of the child or perpetrator. "Thus," they concluded, "seriousness scores for child abuse incidents reflect a complex network of situational and individual-specific factors" (1978, p. 19).

Some researchers have studied professional judgments by varying the amount of case information that is given to the subject. Golan (1969) reported a study of workers' decisions about applicants' requests for service at community mental health centers. The content of recordings of 98 intake interviews in two mid-western community mental health centers were analyzed by two panels of judges. One panel identified the point during the interview where the worker first indicated that a decision had been made regarding disposition of the case. The other panel classified the applicants according to a set of predefined clinical categories.

Golan found significant patterning between applicant characteristics and worker choice of dispositions. Interestingly, Golan also reported that the workers had collected superfluous information during the course of the interview since most decisions were made based on three indicators: (a) degree of affective disturbance reported, (b) extent of behavioral incapacitation evidenced, and (c) use of escape from reality as the primary problem-solving method. The conclusion "appeared inescapable" that workers could carry out their function more efficiently and productively and arrive

at more helpful decisions regarding disposition if they knew what it was most important to focus on and what information clients were most likely to provide.

The Golan study is relevant to the present research. It demonstrates the patterning of professional judgments at the point of initial contact. It also demonstrates that professional judgments may be based on only a few of the variables in the presenting situation.

Using vignettes based on factors drawn from actual application materials, Wolins (1963, 1970) found a similar inefficiency in the use of data in making decisions about the relative qualities of foster home applicants. The purpose of the research was to study the ranking decisions made by workers who were handling applicants for licensing as foster parents. The researcher developed a number of case summaries based on actual applications and submitted them to the staff of three public and two voluntary foster care agencies. Each worker was asked several things about each summary, including how the case should be ranked as a potential foster home.

Wolins found a high level of agreement between the rankings of workers within the same agency. More interestingly, he found that the amount of information available to the worker was almost inversely related to reliability; that is, the more bulk a case record contained, the less likely that the workers would agree on its relative ranking. In fact, cases from which 60% of the information had been randomly

deleted were associated with the same level of agreement among worker-judges as were the full cases. Agreement was highest between raters when the material was further reduced by retaining only information for preselected categories. Wolins also found that the agreement between workers was enhanced when they were given an outline to follow when analyzing cases and when they had been trained in how to use it.

Wolin's study demonstrates the feasibility and fruitfulness of exploring professional judgments via a field experimental research design using vignettes as the independent variables.

#### Statement of the Problem

How well does the available research speak to the needs of child protective workers in the field? Studies of the effects of self-care on developmental outcomes in middle childhood strongly imply that the self-care child fares as well as the child who is in adult care. What of the short term, however? How should the degree of risk for harm implicit in the self-care situation be assessed? No empirical research was found that identified probable causes of harm, incidence rates, or family contextual variables related to harm incurred due to lack of supervision. Some of the child advocacy literature (e.g., Vance County Schools, 1984) lists areas to be covered in training children in self-care skills. There is no empirical evidence, however, supporting the



age-appropriateness of the skills or the training, or the retention-maintenance of skills after training (see Jones, 1984). It is not clear, either, where the thresholds of concern lie. How young is too young to be left alone for extended periods? How old is old enough? Child protective professionals are left on their own to set their own parameters. State and local policies exist but at present must be interpreted case by case by the individual worker on the line.

The research problem is found in this ambiguous area of child welfare practice. How do front line protective services professionals decide when to intervene in the parent-child relationship and how intrusively, especially in the child self-care situation? More specifically, how do the characteristics of the self-care child or its family influence professional judgments of neglect when a decision to intervene must be made? Moreover, do certain characteristics of the judges themselves systematically influence their judgments?

Previous research indicates that with respect to choosing between persons to be adoptive parents or foster parents, between group care and foster home care for children, and between in-patient treatment and out-patient treatment in community mental health settings, social workers are influenced by both personal and situational variables. It is reasonable to expect professional choices between intervening or not in response to reports of neglect due to lack of

supervision to be subject to similar influences. These factors might include age and sex of child, amount of time the child is left alone, whether the child is left to wander or has definite routines and "territory," whether the child knows where his or her parents are, and whether the parents have been reported previously.

This study addressed the question of how selected characteristics of the unsupervised, latchkey, or, more specifically, the self-care arrangement, influence professional judgments of neglect. The following hypotheses guided the research:

Hypothesis 1: Social workers' judgments of the degree of neglect in the child self-care situation will vary inversely with the age of the child who is left alone.

Hypothesis 2: Social workers' judgments of the degree of neglect in the child self-care situation will vary directly with the amount of time the child is left alone.

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODS AND PROCEDURES

##### Selecting the Research Design

As the research problem was being formulated, informal consultations were held with social workers who were working in child protection. Their reactions were sought to the basic concept of the research. They were enthusiastic about the project and shared their knowledge of the systems and processes that comprise child protective work in North Carolina. Several research design options and methods were suggested by these discussions and by a concurrent reading of the social research design literature. Each design option that was considered had strengths and weaknesses. These will be summarized below. The final decision, however, was to attack the problem of decomposing professional judgments of neglect by means of a field experiment. Judgments can be elicited experimentally that will have both immediacy and validity. The objects about which professional judgments are elicited can be given a plausible, "real life" quality. More importantly, the multicollinearity of real life events can be controlled in a field experiment.

The other design options considered were survey research, and content analysis of official documents and records. These designs were ultimately rejected because of their

failure to defend adequately against alternative explanations of the findings.

### Design Options

Survey research designs. Structured interviews with families who have been reported for child neglect due to lack of supervision could generate considerable information, especially about why the children had been left alone. There are difficulties associated with this approach, however. Agency policies protecting client privacy would very likely require that families should be allowed to choose to give or withhold consent to being interviewed. Self-selection biases could seriously compromise the study. Similarly, agency directors might be unwilling to permit interviewers to intrude on families who are no longer receiving services from the agency. In some cases, especially where court action was pending, the parents' attorneys might advise against participation. Finally, families that had been reported but not investigated, or where complaints had been unsubstantiated, would not be available. Therefore, considerable data describing marginal families would be missed entirely.

Structured interviews with child protective professionals would seem to be a very direct approach to uncovering facts about what agencies, through their professional staff, do when lack of supervision is reported to them, about what

knowledge and beliefs about child self-care are current in the field, and about what investigators look for while evaluating a situation. On the deficit side, however, the study would be flawed to the extent that persons are not typically fully aware of the biases and value preferences they apply when making complex judgments. The data would provide only a partial description of what the respondents recollected they had perceived in various self-care situations but not an accurate description of the objective situations. Respondents might also tend to recall and report only currently "hot" cases or cases that had some notoriety, perhaps because they had "blown up" and had somehow damaged the worker.

Content analysis of documents. The North Carolina Division of Social Services maintains a Central Registry of data related to cases of child abuse and neglect reported in North Carolina. The local county departments submit data each month summarizing all complaints of abuse and neglect received during the month. This system has been in place for a decade or longer and is now a reasonably valid representation of the level of child maltreatment in the state. Secondary analysis of this data could yield a great deal of information about the children who have been reported to the protective services agencies and about the perpetrators of abuse and neglect. These data also indicate the treatment interventions that have been attempted as well as recidivism rates. Unfortunately, the category of neglect is not broken

down by type of neglect and does not provide for a sharply focused description of neglect due to lack of supervision. These data would not be particularly useful for this study.

A content analysis of agency case records of substantiated abuse and neglect could provide relatively unbiased data recorded originally for other than research interests. Descriptions of each family situation sufficient to substantiate maltreatment would be available for analysis. The most important defect, however, would be the absence of records of reports that had not been "written up," that is, on which formal written complaints had not been taken, or of investigations that had not resulted in substantiated abuse or neglect. Again, as in the case of interviews with clients, case record analysis would not provide enough information on marginal situations to locate the point at which the situation was judged to be almost, but not quite, serious enough to justify taking a complaint.

Field experimental design. Previous research on professional judgments and decision-making has demonstrated the feasibility of using vignettes in experimental designs (Boehm, 1962; Briar, 1963; Wolins, 1963). Vignette analysis has also been shown to be a powerful method for uncovering the shared preference schedules underlying judgments (Rossi, 1979; Rossi & Anderson, 1982). The vignettes would have to be carefully written in order to hold the respondents' interest and to elicit reliable responses. The major

drawback to this method would be the technical difficulty of incorporating as many potentially meaningful variables in the study as might be desired without sacrificing the interpretability of the results.

### Models of Vignette Methodology

Critical incidents. The critical incidents model has been in use for training child care staff for many years (Beker, 1972). A problematic behavior, interpersonal interaction, or other critical incident is described in a brief vignette. The episode is "open end;" that is, its outcome or resolution is indeterminate. The trainees are asked to complete the story by describing the action they would take and the effect they expect that action to have. Since there is no "book solution" to the problem, critical incidents lend themselves well to discussion, new learning, self-exploration, and the development of group norms.

Models from experimental social psychology. Eckhardt and Ermans (1977) reported a study of the effect of a criminal record on employability. A posttest only, control group experimental design was used. The experimental treatments were resumés (vignettes) which described the same, fictional job applicant variously as (a) having no criminal record, (b) having been charged with a felony but acquitted, or (c) having been convicted of a felony and as having served his time in prison. Subjects were managers of resort hotels. Each

manager was presented with a randomly selected resumé by a field worker who introduced himself as a "personnel consultant." The subjects were asked to indicate whether they would consider the applicant for employment. The group of managers who were exposed to the no criminal record condition served as the control group. Significant differences were found between the experimental groups.

"Vignette analysis" is a method invented by Rossi (1979) to be used in a factorial experimental design to uncover the normative structure of complex judgments in situations about which some a priori information exists. A series of vignettes is generated by a computer programmed to select randomly from a pool of statements describing elements of a complex social situation, for example, family socioeconomic status and child abuse. These vignettes are then randomly presented to a randomly selected sample of subjects drawn from a relevant population, often as part of a larger survey. Subjects rank each vignette on Likert-type scales defining some relevant dimension, for example, "prestige" or "seriousness." Weights are assigned to each variable by regression analysis, thereby demonstrating the relative influence of each variable on the subject's judgments. Rossi tests for response bias by including a few standard vignettes at the beginning of each set of otherwise random combinations of vignettes (Berk & Rossi, 1977). Rossi's work suggests the feasibility of writing realistic vignettes which can be used as objects to be



ranked by child protective professionals according to relative seriousness of neglect.

Campbell and Stanley (1963) discussed the appropriateness of the posttest only, control group experimental design for testing the effects of treatments on outcome variables in situations where pretesting would be inappropriate or inconvenient. The authors gave as an example the experimental study of the effectiveness of teaching methods on the learning of new materials. The design is also appropriate when the experimental treatment and the outcome measure can be administered simultaneously. Both of these considerations apply to the present research problem. In order to measure the principles underlying professional judgments of neglect, the subject's responses should be impromptu. Pretesting would undoubtedly sensitize the subjects to the research objective and might train them to give the responses that they thought the investigator wanted. Thus, by randomly administering the experimental treatments (the vignettes) simultaneously with the outcome measures (a series of Likert-type scales), two goals are achieved: the subject's spontaneous responses are elicited, and all threats to internal validity are controlled (Campbell & Stanley, 1963, p. 8).

The research design. The research problem, therefore, was investigated experimentally in a 5 x 4 factorial experimental design with 20 cells. A minimum cell N of 7 was desired in order to facilitate the use of the analysis of variance in data analysis. Equal cell N's were desirable

in order to enhance the interpretability of the results. The project was a field experiment in which the subjects were professional employees of local county child protective service agencies (Departments of Social Services) whose regular assignments involved them in child protection issues and required them to make decisions about protective interventions. Subjects were not selected at random but were administered the research instrument as they were found in work groups in their home offices. This imposes strict limitations on the generalizability of the findings. Since the primary focus of the research was on the establishment of relationships between situational variables and professional judgments of neglect, however, internal validity issues were of first importance. The factorial design protects against all threats to internal validity quite well.

The experimental treatments in this research were vignettes written in the style and format of reports of suspected child abuse or neglect. The factors (independent variables) were features of child self-care arrangements that were thought likely to influence child protective services workers' judgments about the seriousness of the situation or their choice of agency response to the reports. The factors were completely rotated in the vignettes so that all values or levels of each factor were presented in combination with all values of all other factors, each rotation constituting one experimental treatment (and cell) in the factorial design.

The subjects were randomly assigned to experimental treatments. Each subject judged 1 of 20 possible combinations of factors. Each value of each factor and each combination of factors received an equal number of independent judgments.

The subjects' judgments were measured by rankings of the vignettes on five separate 10-point scales. The dependent measures were (a) the level of agency intervention that would be expected under a narrow interpretation of the child protection laws, (b) the level of agency intervention that most protective services workers would be expected to choose, (c) the level of agency intervention that the subjects would prefer to choose, (d) the seriousness of the neglect, if any, described in the vignette, and (e) the priority that the agency should give to handling the report. The scales were constructed in such a way that higher rankings would correspond to judgments of increasingly serious neglect. Appropriate statistical analysis of the dependent measures was used to test the major hypotheses.

### Developing the Research Instrument

#### Background Research

An initial effort was made to find out as much as possible about the current state of the art of child protective services work in North Carolina regarding neglect due to lack of supervision. The Juvenile Code was revised in 1981.

The child protection chapter included lack of supervision in the definition of "neglected juvenile" (see N.C. Juvenile Code, 1983). State law gives virtually no specific or concrete guidance to child protective services workers in deciding how much supervision is enough in any given situation. Informal discussions with social workers currently working in child protective services suggested that this lack of specificity creates some problems. Many protective services professionals consider complaints of children left alone to be the most difficult to handle of all the complaints they receive. Some child protective services workers see agency intervention as possibly making the family situations worse rather than reducing the risk of harm for the children.

One local agency's guidelines for intake were found to associate specific ages very closely with permissible amounts or kinds of supervision. The guidelines also specify ages at which it would be permissible to leave a young child in charge of other children. A number of independent variables or factors were suggested by this material.

A review of legislation applying to children in North Carolina reveals that the only law setting out a specific age requirement related to supervision is a law to protect children from harm due to fire (N.C. General Statutes, 1983). Essentially, "no child less than 8 years of age" may be "locked or otherwise confined" in any dwelling, building or enclosure unless some person "of the age of discretion" is left in charge.

Based on this review, a list was developed of approximately 24 characteristics of the child in self-care or the self-care situation that could be used as factors in the present study.

#### First Draft of the Vignette

Six factors were selected around which to build the first vignettes: namely, (a) age of the target child, (b) maturity of the child, (c) time of day the child is alone, (d) length of time the child is alone, (e) whether or not there is a telephone available to the child, and (f) how the child feels when alone (for example, confident or fearful). Several other factors were held constant and were included on the assumption that the professionals would want to know the child's or family's status with respect to them. These included (a) the relationship to the child of the person making the report, (b) the child's sex, (c) absence of mental handicap, (d) family structure and composition, (e) the parents' reason for using self-care, (f) the child's activities while alone, (g) the parents' attitude toward discipline, (h) the availability of an adult to the child while the child is alone, and (i) the child's knowledge of what to do in an emergency.

Several problems with these first vignettes became apparent rather quickly. The conceptual and practical difficulty of interpreting a 6-way interaction, should such be found in the data, was overwhelming and implied in and of itself that

some rather drastic simplifying had to be done. Secondly, a total of 16 levels or values were associated with the six factors. This entailed a  $3 \times 3 \times 3 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2$  factorial design with 324 intersections or cells. To have a minimum of 7 subjects per cell would necessitate testing 2,282 subjects. A project of that size, while interesting, exceeded available resources, including the necessary number of subjects. Finally, it was obvious that there were too many extraneous variables in the vignettes which, even though held constant, would likely influence worker judgments of neglect in unknown ways.

Another major problem was technical and had to be resolved no matter how the problems with the vignettes were resolved. Production of the final versions of the vignettes (324 in the case of the first version, for example) presented a mammoth typing task. There was a very real possibility of error in rotating the factors, compounded by the inherent dullness of the task. Upon reflection, it appeared that this task was one well suited to a computer or word processor.

Carl Staley, Executive Director of United Day Care Services, Inc., Greensboro, was asked about using his agency's word processor to generate the vignettes mechanically. Staley was interested in helping and was intrigued by the technical challenges posed by the vignette method. Nori Torbert, Staley's administrative assistant, saw

the structural parallels between the requirements of this project and a data processing routine regularly performed by their machine to calculate employee sick leave. Once the vignette format had been mapped onto the existing programs and the basic libraries of paragraphs and phrases had been written into the machine's memory, it would be a simple matter to generate the vignettes. Photocopying and careful collating of pages would then complete the production of the research instruments.

#### Second Draft of the Vignette

A decision had to be made about how many subjects to attempt to include in the study. No list of child protective workers in North Carolina was available. It was necessary, then, to estimate the maximum number of subjects who could be tested if all possible subjects were contacted.

There are 100 counties and 100 Departments of Social Services in North Carolina. A few are large, urbanized counties. Most, however, are small and rural. While the agencies in the larger counties might have 20 or more child protection specialists, the smaller counties may have only 2 or 3 workers who carry protective services responsibilities part-time. An assumption was made that the average county would have three child protective services workers on staff. Therefore, the maximum number of potential subjects for this study was estimated to be 300.

Another constraint on the number of factors to include in the vignettes was the requirement that there should be no less than 7 in each cell. This figure was adopted as a minimum size cell N to permit the use of ANOVA in the data analysis. The actual size of the sampling population was uncertain. Three-way interaction was accepted as the most complex analytical model to be attempted. Therefore, the vignette should be built around no more than three factors.

Independent variables. A public child protection agency made available samples of anonymous intake notes. Each of the reports had resulted in an investigation. Protective workers identify and weigh many factors before substantiating abuse or neglect but, when an initial report is received, only a few data are collected before a decision to intervene is made. These data may include (a) the child's name and address, (b) the parent's name, (c) the age and sex of the child, (d) the details of what happened and whether it has happened previously, and (e) the child's condition and present location. For example, one of the reports reads as follows:

Children, 5 years old and 8 years old, are unsupervised from 2:00 p.m. (or when they get home from school) until father gets home from work which is usually 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. This has been going on "a long time." Reporter is afraid children are going to get run over or hurt.

Another memo contains even fewer details:

Children, sisters 6 and 4, live with their grandmother. Oldest answered the phone and said grandmother not there, that she would be back in a little while. Oldest child is looking after the 4 year old sister.



In one instance, the child's behavior and the parent's attitude are focal points of concern.

Child, a girl, is 8 and is home alone after school from 2:45-6:00. 3 year old sister is in a nursery. The 8 year old has started causing a lot of trouble in the neighborhood. She fights with the other kids and curses out the other children. The other children are afraid of her. The complainant tried to talk to the mother about the problems and she hung up on her. Father works at a bank and the mother teaches out of town.

A final example suggests that a report of suspected neglect due to lack of supervision may hint at parental inadequacies in other areas.

Three children under 10, the youngest is 3 years old. Mother consistently leaves the children alone for long periods of time. She's frequently gone all night and no one is there to help the children get ready for school in the mornings. Mother is often not there when the older children get home from school. The mother is regularly drunk. During the day she carries the 3 year old to liquor houses. The older children have missed school a lot because mother is not there in the mornings to get them off to school. They were out all last week from school (mother claimed they had the flu, but the children were seen outside playing).

The central implication of these examples for the construction of the vignettes was that, in order to appear authentic, they would have to be simple, concrete, and specific. The number of variables in the first draft, while appropriate for the summary of a complete investigation, would have to be radically reduced in order to resemble an initial report of suspected maltreatment.

Since much of the debate about the risk of harm associated with child self-care seems to turn on the age of the child, the amount of time the child is left alone, and

how often the child is left alone, it was assumed that these factors would also influence a protective worker's definition of the situation as well as the initial plan of action.

This assumption was supported by conversations with protective services professionals during which they often said that they wished lawmakers would specify an age at which children would be old enough to be left alone or in charge of other children. Their comments suggested both that age is an important variable in the decision process and that there may not be agreement about how old a child should be before being left alone or as a "sitter" for other children.

Whether or not there was general agreement on age and time alone, other comments made to the author indicated that there might not be agreement about how serious the self-care situation is. Some workers expressed strong beliefs about the negative effects of leaving children of any age alone for any amount of time. Others wondered if their interventions made some already marginal family situations even more difficult, especially when the children involved were being left alone only briefly.

Based on these considerations, a decision was made to study experimentally the effects of child's age and amount of time alone on professional judgments of neglect in the self-care situation. Five categories of age of child were selected and four categories of time alone were specified. This resulted in a 5 x 4 factorial design with 20 cells.

A minimum population of 140 was required (cell  $N = 7 \times 20$  cells = 140 subjects). This seemed to be a realistic expectation. The full vignette is reproduced in Table 2 on the following page.

Age. A "neglected juvenile" as defined in North Carolina law is a person under 18 years of age. Thus, any five age categories between birth and 18 could have been selected. The 13-17 year portion of the range was not considered. In some ways, this was an arbitrary decision. It may be true that the special needs of handicapped teenagers entail a requirement for close supervision. The current debate over children in self-care arrangements, however, revolves around school-age children and preschoolers, their needs, competencies, and vulnerabilities (e.g., Long & Long, 1982; Rodman, Pratto, & Nelson, in press). Therefore, a decision was made to focus on the effects of ages selected from the 0-12 year range. Ages 5, 9, and 12 were chosen as representing children at certain socially defined transition points: 5-year-olds are still preschoolers yet almost first-graders; 9-year-olds are typically about to complete the primary grades; 12-year-olds are not yet teenagers but neither are they young children any longer. Each of these ages was expected to impact distinctively on the judgments of professionals about the safety or risk involved in self-care for the child described in the vignette.

## Table 2

The Vignette

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Instructions: Please read the Situation carefully, then answer the questions.

Situation

A concerned relative has called about John, age (insert age variable: 2, 5, 7, 9, or 12). John is an only child and lives alone with his mother. John is usually home alone from about 3:00 p.m. until about (insert time variable: 3:10, 4:00, 6:00, or 9:00) p.m. John's mother says she thinks he is old enough to look after himself and that he is all right being alone. The caller is afraid something might happen. The caller had no other information.

Since there is a fire safety law in North Carolina that specifies that children who are not yet 8 years old are too young to be left alone "in an enclosure," a decision was made to add age 7 to the age factor. Age 2 was selected in order to describe a child who was objectively very young but whom some might assume to have minimum self-care skills.

Time alone. Four categories of time alone were selected: 10 minutes, 1 hour, 3 hours, and 6 hours. Time, which is perhaps the most perfect example of the continuous variable, is not easily divided into categories. For the purposes of this study, however, it was important that one category correspond to a long period of time and that another should represent a short period. Ten minutes was selected to represent a short period. Six hours was selected to represent a long time alone. One hour might be perceived to be more than a few minutes but still not a very long time to leave a child alone. Rodman and Pratto (1980a) found that the youngsters in their study were in self-care for an average of between 1 and 2 hours per day. About 24% of the children in their sample were alone for less than 2 hours each week, and 16% were reported to be alone 10 hours or more. Three hours was selected as another specification of the time factor to represent a plausible after-school situation wherein the child returns home at 3:00 p.m. and is alone until about 6:00 p.m. when the parents arrive from work. The

range of time alone seemed rather broad and was expected to invite variable judgments from the subjects in the experiment.

Constants. Eight characteristics of the situation were held constant across all 20 versions of the vignette: (a) relationship of the caller to the situation; (b) sex of the target child; (c) family composition; (d) sex of the parent; (e) time of day (as distinct from amount of time alone); (f) parent's rationale or justification for using self-care; and (g) caller's reason for calling. The eighth constant is more subtle: the nature of the lack of supervision. The vignette states that John is "usually home alone" for varying periods of time. The intent was to imply that the youngster's mother was physically away from the home and that the child was literally alone. Protective services professionals are required to deal with other types of parental absence that are important but not pertinent to the purpose of the present inquiry. Those other situations include lack of supervision due to parental illness or other incapacitation such as intoxication or psychosis. Parental indiscretion and poor judgment in setting limits on the child may be involved. For example, children may be locked out of the house either to exclude them from adult activities or to keep them away from potential sources of danger or damage inside the house. These types of situations may cause a protective services professional to suspect abuse rather than neglect.

Dependent variables. Judgments, in the immediate context, are understood to be mental acts involving discrimination and values. Judgments are expressed objectively through choice behaviors such as selecting, categorizing, labelling, and rank-ordering objects. In this study, the choice behaviors that were accepted as professional judgments of neglect were made by employees of local Departments of Social Services in North Carolina who, by virtue of their jobs, were assigned and authorized to respond to reports of suspected child maltreatment. Referents for neglect judgments included choosing to take or not to take a formal complaint of abuse or neglect, selecting a more intrusive rather than a less intrusive intervention into the family situation of the child who was the subject of the complaint, and rating the seriousness and urgency of the report. These choice behaviors may be influenced by the perceived degree of harm that could result from not taking the situation seriously enough, individual expectations regarding the risk of harm to the child from over-reacting to the situation, and the professional's sense of where the agency's priorities should be set given available resources of time, treatment options, and community support.

Five separate dependent measures were taken of the effects of the experimental treatment. These five measures were in the form of questions about the vignette. Subjects answered the questions, that is, expressed their judgments,

by choosing from among a set of 10 predefined response choices presented with each question. The five dependent variables are listed in Table 3.

Subjects were first asked three questions about what the official response would or should be to the situation as described in the vignette. The first question was, "Under a narrow interpretation of the child protection law, what response would your agency make to this call?" Responses to the first question were expected to measure the effect of the experimental treatments on the subjects' judgments when the provisions of the child protection law were strictly applied to the conditions described in the vignette.

North Carolina law states that a "neglected child" is "a child less than 18 years of age who does not receive proper . . . supervision . . . from his parent, guardian, custodian, or caretaker . . ." (N.C. Gen. Statutes, 1983). State policy for child protection adopts this definition (N.C. Division of Social Services, 1984). The law also requires that all reports of suspected abuse and neglect are to be investigated unless

the description of the alleged incident does not indicate that the problem is one of abuse or neglect within the definition of this manual and the law, that the child is not less than 18 years of age, or that the alleged perpetrator is not a parent, guardian, custodian, or caretaker. (N.C. Division of Social Services, 1984)

Further, state policy implies that suspected abuse is more serious, or may require a more urgent and intrusive response,



Table 3

Dependent Variables

- 
1. Under a narrow interpretation of the child protection law, what response would your agency make to this call?
  2. In practice, what response would most child protection workers make to this call?
  3. Setting aside for the moment the requirements of current state and local policies, what response do you think ought to be made to this call?
  4. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning that no maltreatment exists and with 10 meaning that the maltreatment is very serious, how serious is the child maltreatment described by the caller?
  5. On a scale of 1 to 10, how high a priority should this type of call be given by Protective Services?
-

than neglect. For example, when a neglect complaint is taken the child must be seen within 72 hours but when an abuse complaint is taken, the child must be seen within 24 hours. Furthermore, when an abuse complaint is taken and the child appears to be in imminent or present danger, the protective services agency is empowered to take the child into temporary custody immediately (N.C. Division of Social Services, 1984). Accordingly, subjects were given 10 alternatives from which to choose their answer to the first question. These alternatives ranged along a continuum of intrusiveness into the parent-child relationship. The most intrusive alternatives reflected the legally authorized courses of action summarized above. The 10 response categories are presented in Table 4. They are precoded in order of increasing intrusiveness. Because their training and experience is consistent with the legally defined framework for action, protective services professionals will choose interventions that are proportionate to the type and seriousness of the child maltreatment they judge to be in the vignettes.

The second question was, "In practice, what response would most child protection workers make to this call?" The subjects were directed to choose their answers from an array of responses that were identical to the one that had been presented with the first question. The second question was expected to measure the effects of the experimental

Table 4

Predefined Response Categories for Dependent  
Measures 1, 2, and 3.

Code	Response Items
1	The caller would be informed that there is no basis for agency intervention.
2	The caller would be advised to call back if the situation worsens, and no other action would be taken.
3	The caller would be referred to another community agency.
4	The caller would be referred to the regular services intake unit of your agency.
5	A formal complaint would not be taken, but the mother would be contacted and cautioned.
6	A dependency complaint would be taken.
7	A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 72 hours.
8	A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.
9	An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 24 hours.
10	An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.

treatments on professional judgments of neglect as reflected in actual practice decisions.

Protective services professionals are continually open to criticism from two conflicting directions. They are often criticized for failing to act swiftly or forcefully enough to reports of child abuse or neglect, whether or not the reports are valid. On the other hand, they are frequently accused of over-reacting and of being "anti-family" or unreasonable when they attempt to enforce the child protection laws, especially with respect to neglect due to lack of supervision. It was assumed that some subjects might be reluctant to describe directly their own practice decisions for fear they would be seen as being either more permissive or more restrictive than official policy required. In response to the second question, then, subjects could express a personal point of view but could attribute it to "most child protection workers."

The third question was, "Setting aside for the moment the requirements of current state and local policies, what response do you think ought to be made to this call?" This question was expected to measure the influence of the experimental treatments on professional judgments of neglect from the perspective of the subjects' beliefs and preferences about what is best for families and children in situations where the child or children are left alone. Analysis of subjects' responses to this question may indicate that in

the view of practicing child protection professionals, state policy fails to take child self-care seriously enough and that more intrusive intervention and remediation are in order. Or, it may appear that nonintrusive action is more appropriate, that is, that child self-care, in the absence of concurrent abuse or other actual injury, is not a protective services matter. This is an important policy issue.

The fourth and fifth dependent variables were measured on 10-point, Likert-type scales. For dependent variable 4, the scale value "1" appeared at the left end. For dependent variable 5 the low value appeared at the right end. The fourth dependent variable asked, "On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning that no maltreatment exists and with 10 meaning that the maltreatment is very serious, how serious is the child maltreatment described by the caller?" This question was designed to measure directly the effect of the experimental treatments on the subjects' judgments of the seriousness of the neglect or abuse described in the vignette, including the judgment that no maltreatment was described.

The fifth dependent variable asked, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how high a priority should this type of call be given by Protective Services?" A rating of 1 indicated a judgment of "very low priority" while a 10 indicated "very high priority." This question was expected to measure the effect of the experimental treatments on professional judgments of

the seriousness of the situation described in the vignette relative to the full range of maltreatment reported to child protection agencies. Professional perspectives on the question of priority also relate to important policy issues having to do with allocation of resources within the community and the possible "decriminalization" of child self-care as a community concern.

This study addressed the question of how selected characteristics of the self-care arrangement influence professional judgments of neglect. The following hypotheses guided the research and were tested by analysis of data derived from each of the five dependent measures described above:

Hypothesis 1: Social workers' judgments of the degree of neglect in the child self-care situation will vary inversely with the age of the child who is left alone.

Hypothesis 2: Social workers' judgments of the degree of neglect in the child self-care situation will vary directly with the amount of time the child is left alone.

Subject variables. Professional judgments of neglect in child self-care arrangements may be influenced by subject variables or by variables associated with the setting in which the subject works. A series of questions were asked, therefore, to elicit background data about these attributes

and characteristics. It was assumed that professional judgments might be influenced by the organizational role occupied by the subject. This was asked in two ways. What is your position called? Do you consider your position to be primarily direct client service, supervisory, or administrative? Believing that the degree of exposure to protective situations might influence professional judgments, the author asked about the percentage of the regular work week devoted to protective matters, the number of years of experience in protective work each subject had, and the average number of cases each subject dealt with each month that had been referred due to lack of supervision. It was also assumed that professional education might influence the direction of a subject's response. Thus, another question asked what the subject's highest academic degree was and the major area in which that degree had been taken. Data were also collected on each subject's race, age, and sex as well as marital status, parental status, and age and residence of youngest child. Presumably, if judgments of neglect in self-care situations have a heavy subjective component, then the subject's status as a parent of young children might have a significant influence on the direction of those judgments. Subject variables were introduced in regression analysis of the experimental data as possible alternative explanations for workers' judgments.

The final draft of the research instrument is reproduced in Appendix A. Two additional vignettes of self-care situations were also presented for the subjects' judgment as part of a larger Family Research Center study. These situations were not investigated in this dissertation, however.

#### Field Testing the Instrument

A field test of the research instrument was necessary for several reasons. First, it was necessary to demonstrate that the subjects would be able to read, understand, and respond appropriately to the instrument. Second, the introductory material and the instructions required a trial for clarity. The principal investigator also needed to practice administering the instrument under field conditions. Finally, the feedback provided by the subjects during the field test regarding wording, clarity, and interest could be used to refine the instrument.

Approximately 20 direct service, supervisory, and administrative staff from a local county Department of Social Services and a local Juvenile Court Counselling Service participated in the field test. These subjects were judged to resemble the study population in training, experience, work setting, and caseload and were, therefore, an appropriate and realistic trial group. There were two trial administrations. All subjects reported that they found the



instrument to be interesting, comprehensible, and relevant to child protection. They reported that the instructions were clear and easily followed. It was observed that the least amount of time in which the instrument could be satisfactorily completed was 10 minutes. The greatest amount of time any subject took to complete the experimental task was 30 minutes.

Participants made helpful suggestions about the ordering of the response categories on the intrusiveness scales for dependent variables 1, 2, and 3. Experienced child welfare workers who participated in the field test affirmed that the dependent measures had face validity and that the intrusiveness scales did appear to represent a true continuum of alternative official agency actions in response to reports of suspected child maltreatment.

Visual inspection of the data collected during the field tests revealed considerable apparent variability in responses to the dependent measures.

The field trials enabled the principal investigator to refine his introduction and devise a well organized presentation of the materials.

The field tests demonstrated that the research instrument had face validity and was interesting to a diverse group of child-serving professionals. The trials also demonstrated that the experimental task was not aversive but elicited an enthusiastic response from most subjects.

## Data Collection

### Randomizing the Experimental Treatments

A crucial aspect of the factorial experimental design is the random assignment of subjects to treatment groups. In this study, each treatment group was defined by the particular version of the vignette to which each member of the group was asked to respond. Random assignment to groups, then, was most efficiently done by randomly sequencing the vignettes and distributing them to subjects in that sequence.

The final edition of the instrument was generated by a word processor as described above. Each value of each factor had a distinctive identifying number. Each vignette had a distinctive identifying number also that coded which factor values were included in it.

Since the largest expected cell N was 10, and since the 5 x 4 factorial yielded 20 groups, 10 copies of each vignette and its associated dependent measures, and 200 copies of the background questionnaire and cover letter were photocopied and collated into 200, seven-page booklets. The 200 booklets were then serially numbered 001-200 and a master list of these case numbers was constructed. Using a table of random numbers, the numbers 001-200 were randomly ordered and that list was recorded. The serially numbered instruments were then rearranged by case number according to the randomized list. Throughout the study, this random ordering was preserved and

governed the sequence in which the instruments were distributed among each group of subjects.

As each instrument was used and collected, a notation was made on the list of randomized case numbers of the county where the instrument was used. This record provided a visual check on the correct distribution of the instruments and is an indicator of how well the subjects were distributed geographically and demographically.

#### Selecting the Subjects

A minimum number of 140 subjects was required. The plan was to arrange to meet with groups of child protective services staff until 140-200 instruments were completed and collected. At that point, data collection would cease. An attempt would be made to meet with every staff person who was assigned protective services-related duties full- or part-time in the counties that were visited but no attempt would be made to select subjects randomly.

In order to arrange to meet with the protective services staff, the investigator contacted the local county Director of Social Services or the child protective services supervisor in each county. In order to establish his identity and credibility with the staff at the local level, the investigator had requested and been granted a letter from the North Carolina Division of Social Services addressed to each county director in the state, introducing him and the project and encouraging the counties to cooperate. (A copy

of this letter is included as Appendix B.) Since resources were limited, a series of day trips was planned. As many neighboring counties as possible were to be visited during each trip.

Advance arrangements were made by phone with the county directors or child protective services supervisors in a total of 29 counties. Data were collected during 8 trips over a 5-week period during July and August, 1984. Sixteen groups were tested during morning hours and 13 during afternoon hours. The typical amount of time spent with each group was 45 minutes.

## CHAPTER IV

## RESULTS

The analysis of variance statistical procedure was used to test the hypothesis of main effects for each of the five dependent variables in the study. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests the hypothesis that the means of two or more experimental groups are equal. The alpha level for acceptance or rejection of the null hypothesis was set at .05. The experimental groups are defined by one or more categorical variables. The experimental groups in this study were defined by the categorical variables, or factors, Age of Child and Time Alone. These factors were described earlier.

The ANOVA procedure assumes that the dependent variable is defined by interval level data (Norusis, 1983). The five dependent variables in this study were measured on separate 10-point scales. These scales were described earlier, also. The dependent variables are defined by ordinal level data. A decision was made, however, to treat the data as interval level data and to use ANOVA. This decision was consistent with the position taken by Roscoe (1975) that

If the dependent variable is measured on an ordinal scale, there is some debate as to whether the investigator is restricted to use of those nonparametric statistics intended for use with ordinal data. Some statisticians feel this is a critical distinction which needs to be observed. However, the position taken here is that the distinction between ordinal and interval data may be ignored under most circumstances. (p. 194)

Certain aspects of the research appear to justify treating the data as interval level data: (a) the dependent variables were conceptualized as continua with values ranging from low to high; (b) descriptors of the 10 points on these continua were based on the provisions of actual law and policy that presume a dimension of seriousness in abuse and neglect; (c) the professionals who participated in the field tests of the research instrument reported that the sets of alternative responses to the experimental tasks appeared to them to represent a series of progressively more intrusive agency interventions; and (d) the results of the statistical analyses are both interpretable and consistent with the hypotheses and the rationale for the study.

#### Main Effects

The findings will be described and interpreted for each dependent variable separately.

Dependent variable 1. "Under a narrow interpretation of the child protection law, what response would your agency make to this call?"

Responses to the first question were expected to measure the effect of the experimental treatments on the subjects' judgments when the child protection law was strictly applied.

The hypotheses of the study predict that (a) scores on Dependent Variable 1 will vary inversely with the age of the child described in the vignette, and (b) scores on

Dependent Variable 1 will vary positively with the amount of time the child was left alone as described in the vignette. The results of the analysis of variance are summarized in Table 5. The main effect for each factor--Age of Child and Time Alone--was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). Neglect judgments were most sensitive to variation in the Age factor. Age accounted for approximately 28% of the variation in neglect scores under a narrow legal interpretation ( $\text{Eta}^2 = .2809$ ). The factors together accounted for approximately 42% of the variation in the dependent measure ( $R^2 = .416$ ). The direction of the effect of each factor on the dependent measure was as predicted. These statistics are summarized in Table 6.

Group mean judgment scores for Age are shown in the row totals in Table 6. The mean score for Age 2 was 7.36, a high score. Group means became progressively smaller as Age increased through Age 5 (6.83) and Age 7 (6.11). There was a marked contrast between mean score at Age 7 (6.11) and Age 9 (4.75). There followed a slight decline at Age 12 (3.92). The analysis of variance established that at least two of the group means on the Age factor were significantly different. While it could be safely assumed that the largest mean was significantly larger than the smallest mean, in this instance Age 2 vs. Age 12, it was desirable to determine statistically which of the group means were significantly different from one or more of the others. Tukey's

Table 5

Judgments on Dependent Variable 1, Narrow LegalInterpretation: Analysis of Variance

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Main effects					
Child age	297.033	4	74.258	22.361	.001
Time alone	137.706	3	45.902	13.822	.001
Interactions	79.322	12	6.610	1.991	.028
Residual	531.333	160	3.321		
Total	1045.394	179	5.840		
R = .645					
R <sup>2</sup> = .416					
Eta <sup>2</sup>					
Child Age	.2809				
Time alone	.1296				



Table 6

Mean Judgment Scores on Narrow Legal Interpretation: Age of Child by Time Alone<sup>a</sup>

		<u>Time Alone</u>				
		10 min	1 hr	3 hr	6 hr	Total
Age of Child	2 yrs	6.67	7.78	7.11	7.89	7.36 (36)
	5 yrs	5.22	7.00	7.44	7.67	6.83 (36)
	7 yrs	5.11	5.89	7.11	6.33	6.11 (36)
	9 yrs	3.33	3.78	4.89	7.00	4.75 (36)
	12 yrs	3.00	3.00	3.11	6.56	3.92 (36)
Total		4.67 (45)	5.49 (45)	5.93 (45)	7.09 (45)	5.79 (180)

<sup>a</sup>Cell N = 9

honestly significant difference (HSD) multiple range test was used to make all possible pairwise comparisons among group means for each factor of Age and Time. This is the most appropriate procedure to use for this purpose when the groups are the same size (Roscoe, 1975). The results of these tests are summarized in Table 7.

On the first dependent variable, Narrow Legal Interpretation, two subgroups of Age were identified. Means for Ages 12 and 9 were not significantly different nor were the means for Ages 7, 5, and 2 significantly different among themselves. The mean neglect scores for both Age 12 and Age 9 were significantly different from the mean neglect scores for Ages 7, 5, and 2, however.

A review of the response categories for Questions 1 through 3 is suggestive at this point (Table 4). The response category that was coded "6" implies that a formal complaint would be taken in response to the vignette. Since a formal complaint necessarily entails the opening of a record and an investigation of the circumstances surrounding the report in order to substantiate the complaint, this response represents a strong official intrusion into the privacy of the parent-child relationship. The response category that was coded "5" indicates that a formal complaint would not be taken, that is, no record would be opened and no investigation would be made, but the parent would be contacted and cautioned. While this action also represents an intrusive official response, it is a relatively low-keyed

Table 7

Multiple Group Comparisons for Dependent Variable 1,  
Narrow Legal Interpretation

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Tukey's H.S.D. Procedure (.05 level)

Homogeneous Subsets, Age Factor

Subset 1

Group	12 years	9 years
Mean	3.9167	4.7500

Subset 2

Group	7 years	5 years	2 years
Mean	6.1111	6.8333	7.3611

Homogeneous Subsets, Time Factor

Subset 1

Group	10 minutes	1 hour
Mean	4.6667	5.4889

Subset 2

Group	1 hour	3 hours
Mean	5.4889	5.9333

Subset 3

Group	3 hours	6 hours
Mean	5.9333	7.0889

---

response. To the extent that the mean scores for Age 7 and Age 9 in Table 6 (rounded to 6 and 5, respectively) can be compared to the coded response categories in Table 4, the statistics suggest that ages less than 8 years elicited relatively intrusive responses and, therefore, more judgments of neglect than did older ages. If this is so, there may be a tolerance limit related to Age of Child for Dependent Variable 1, Narrow Legal Interpretation. That limit was found to be at age 8 in this sample.

The direction of the effect of the Time factor on average judgments under a narrow legal interpretation was as predicted. Mean scores of the Time groups are shown in the column totals in Table 6. The mean score for 10 minutes was 4.67; for 1 hour, 5.49; for 3 hours, 5.93; and for 6 hours, 7.09. The results of the HSD multiple comparison test are summarized in Table 7. Group means for 10 minutes and 1 hour were not significantly different. Group means for 1 hour and 3 hours were not significantly different, nor were the mean scores for 3 hours and 6 hours. The mean score for 10 minutes was significantly smaller than the means for 3 hours and 6 hours. The mean score for 1 hour was also significantly smaller than the mean score for 6 hours. On the average, given a strict interpretation of the law, 3 hours alone was judged to be significantly more serious than 10 minutes alone. Also, 6 hours alone

was judged to be significantly more serious than both 10 minutes and 1 hour.

Dependent Variable 2. "In practice, what response would most child protection workers make to this call?"

Responses to the second question were expected to measure the effects of the experimental treatments on professional judgments of neglect in actual practice.

The hypotheses of the study predict that (a) scores on Dependent Variable 2 will vary inversely with the age of the child described in the vignette, and (b) scores on Dependent Variable 2 will vary positively with the amount of time the child was left alone as described in the vignette. The results of the analysis of variance for the second dependent variable are summarized in Table 8. Main effects were statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ) and the direction of the main effects on mean scores on the second dependent measure were in the predicted directions (see Table 9). The results of the multiple comparisons of group means are displayed in Table 10. On the average, the situation of the 12-year-old boy in self-care was judged to be significantly less serious than those in which boys 7, 5, and 2 years old were alone. Similarly, the mean neglect score for Age 9 is significantly smaller than the mean scores for Ages 5 and 2. On the Time factor, mean neglect scores clearly distinguish between the 10-minute condition and all

Table 8

Judgments on Dependent Variable 2, Response of Most  
Protective Services Workers: Analysis of Variance

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Main effects					
Child age	285.056	4	71.264	22.022	.001
Time alone	182.506	3	60.835	18.799	.001
Interactions	76.189	12	6.349	1.962	.031
Residual	517.778	160	3.236		
Total	1061.528	179	5.930		
R = .664					
R <sup>2</sup> = .440					
Eta <sup>2</sup>					
Child age	.2704				
Time alone	.1681				

Table 9

Mean Judgment Scores on Response of  
Most CPS Workers: Age of Child by  
Time Alone<sup>a</sup>

	<u>Time Alone</u>				
	10 min	1 hr	3 hr	6 hr	Total
2 yrs	6.33	7.56	7.22	7.89	7.25 (36)
5 yrs	3.78	7.44	6.89	7.67	6.44 (36)
7 yrs	4.56	6.00	7.00	6.56	6.03 (36)
9 yrs	3.56	3.78	4.78	7.00	4.78 (36)
12 yrs	2.67	2.78	3.44	5.89	3.69 (36)
Total	4.18 (45)	5.51 (45)	5.87 (45)	7.00 (45)	5.64 (180)

<sup>a</sup>Cell N = 9.

Table 10

Multiple Group Comparisons for Dependent Variable 2:Response of Most Protective Service Workers


---

 Tukey's H.S.D. Procedure (.05 level)

## Homogeneous Subsets, Age Factor

## Subset 1

Group	12 years	9 years
Mean	3.6944	4.7778

## Subset 2

Group	9 years	7 years
Mean	4.7778	6.0278

## Subset 3

Group	7 years	5 years	2 years
Mean	6.0278	6.444	7.2500

## Homogeneous Subsets, Time Factor

## Subset 1

Group	10 minutes
Mean	4.1778

## Subset 2

Group	1 hour	3 hours
Mean	5.5111	5.8667

## Subset 3

Group	3 hours	6 hours
Mean	5.8667	7.0000

---



other Time groups. The mean score for 1 hour is also significantly smaller than the mean score for 6 hours. As a practical matter, it may not be considered neglectful to have left a child alone for 10 minutes, whereas an hour or more may be more severely judged and invoke intrusive agency interventions.

Dependent Variable 3. "Setting aside for the moment the requirements of current state and local policies, what response do you think ought to be made to this call?"

Responses to the third question were expected to measure the effect of the experimental treatments on professional judgments of neglect from the perspective of the subjects' beliefs and preferences about what is best for families and children in situations where the child or children are left alone.

The hypotheses of the study predict that (a) scores on Dependent Variable 3 will vary inversely with the age of the child described in the vignette, and (b) scores on Dependent Variable 3 will vary positively with the amount of time the child was left alone as described in the vignette. The results of the analysis of variance for the third dependent variable are summarized in Table 11. Main effects were statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ) and the direction of the main effects on mean scores on the third dependent measure were in the predicted directions (Table 12). There appears to be a linear relationship between Age of Child and neglect scores

Table 11

Judgments on Dependent Variable 3, Subject's PreferredResponse: Analysis of Variance

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Main effects					
Child age	430.256	4	107.564	44.331	.001
Time alone	152.994	3	50.998	21.018	.001
Interactions	45.478	12	3.790	1.562	.108
Residual	388.222	160	2.426		
Total	1016.950	179	5.681		
R = .757					
R <sup>2</sup> = .574					
Eta <sup>2</sup>					
Child age	.4225				
Time alone	.1521				

Table 12

Mean Judgment Scores on Subject'sPreferred Response: Age of Childby Time Alone<sup>a</sup>

	<u>Time Alone</u>				
	10 min	1 hr	3 hr	6 hr	Total
2 yrs	6.11	8.11	7.67	8.00	7.47 (36)
5 yrs	4.67	7.11	7.00	7.78	6.64 (36)
7 yrs	4.11	5.67	6.44	6.67	5.72 (36)
9 yrs	3.00	4.33	5.00	6.56	4.72 (36)
12 yrs	2.78	2.11	2.67	4.56	3.03 (36)
Total	4.13 (45)	5.47 (45)	5.76 (45)	6.71 (45)	5.52 (180)

<sup>a</sup>Cell N = 9.

on Dependent Variable 3 in that there were no dramatic shifts apparent between adjacent group means. The results of the multiple comparisons of group means are summarized in Table 13. The mean neglect score for Age 9 is significantly lower than the mean scores for Ages 5 and 2. The difference between the means for Ages 7 and 2 is also significant. The mean neglect judgments for Age 12 are significantly lower in comparison to the other age groups. This demonstrates that the self-care arrangement for 12-year-olds is perceived differently by many protective services professionals when compared with their perception of self-care arrangements involving children under 10. This suggests that many child protection specialists may not believe that it is necessarily neglectful to leave a 12-year-old alone. Perhaps in situations involving older children nonintrusive interventions are believed most appropriate to the needs of the children and their families. These might include after-school programs, parent education, stranger safety and home safety training for children, and the like.

Dependent Variable 4. "On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning that no maltreatment exists and with 10 meaning that the maltreatment is very serious, how serious is the child maltreatment described by the caller?"

Responses to the fourth question were expected to yield a direct measure of the effect of the experimental treatments on the subjects' judgments of the seriousness

Table 13

Multiple Group Comparisons for Dependent Variable 3:Subject's Preferred Response


---

 Tukey's H.S.D. Procedure (.05 level)

Homogeneous Subsets, Age Factor

## Subset 1

Group	12 years
Mean	3.0278

## Subset 2

Group	9 years	7 years
Mean	4.7222	5.7222

## Subset 3

Group	7 years	5 years
Mean	5.7222	6.6389

## Subset 4

Group	5 years	2 years
Mean	6.6389	7.4722

Homogeneous Subsets, Time Factor

## Subset 1

Group	10 minutes
Mean	4.1333

## Subset 2

Group	1 hour	3 hours
Mean	5.4667	5.7556

## Subset 3

Group	3 hours	6 hours
Mean	5.7556	6.7111

---

of the maltreatment (that is, the abuse, neglect, or dependency) described in the vignette, including the judgment that no maltreatment was described.

The hypotheses of the study predict that (a) scores on Dependent Variable 4 will vary inversely with the age of the child described in the vignette, and (b) scores on Dependent Variable 4 will vary positively with the amount of time the child was left alone as described in the vignette. The results of the analysis of variance are summarized in Table 14. Main effects were statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). The direction of the main effects on mean scores on the fourth dependent measure were in the predicted direction (Table 15). The results of the multiple comparison of group means are summarized in Table 16. Age 2 clearly received mean seriousness scores that were both high, 7.8 on a scale of 10, and significantly different from the other group means for Age. Apparently, a report to the effect that a 2-year-old has been left alone causes considerable concern for many professionals. By comparison, mean seriousness scores for school-age children were in the low and moderate range (2.3-5.7). No significant difference was found between mean seriousness scores for Ages 5 and 7, nor between Ages 12 and 9. Average seriousness scores for Ages 12 and 9 were significantly lower than those for Ages 5 and 7. When asked to judge the seriousness of leaving a child alone for varying periods of time, professionals did not, on the average, make any

Table 14

Judgments on Dependent Variable 4, Seriousness(Direct Ratings): Analysis of Variance

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Main effects					
Child age	701.856	4	175.464	47.836	.001
Time alone	240.756	3	80.252	21.879	.001
Interactions	77.744	12	6.479	1.766	.058
Residual	586.889	160	3.668		
Total	1607.244	179	8.979		
R = .766					
$R^2 = .586$					
Eta <sup>2</sup>					
Child age	.4356				
Time alone	.1521				

Table 15

Mean Judgment Scores on Seriousness:Direct Rating: Age of Child byTime Alone<sup>a</sup>


---

		<u>Time Alone</u>				
		10 min	1 hr	3 hr	6 hr	Total
Age of	2 yrs	5.89	8.11	8.22	9.00	7.81 (36)
	5 yrs	2.67	7.22	6.00	6.78	5.67 (36)
	7 yrs	2.56	4.33	4.33	6.78	4.50 (36)
	9 yrs	1.44	2.33	3.67	4.56	3.00 (36)
	12 yrs	1.89	1.44	2.11	3.56	2.25 (36)
Total		2.89 (45)	4.69 (45)	4.87 (45)	6.13 (45)	4.64 (180)

---

<sup>a</sup>Cell N = 9



Table 16

Multiple Group Comparisons for Dependent Variable 4:  
Seriousness (Direct Rating)

---

Tukey's H.S.D. Procedure (.05 level)

Homogeneous Subsets, Age Factor

Subset 1

Group	12 years	9 years
Mean	2.2500	3.0000

Subset 2

Group	7 years	5 years
Mean	4.5000	5.6667

Subset 3

Group	2 years
Mean	7.8056

Homogeneous Subsets, Time Factor

Subset 1

Group	10 minutes
Mean	2.8889

Subset 2

Group	1 hour	3 hours	6 hours
Mean	4.6889	4.8667	6.1333

---

significant distinctions between 1 hour or 6 hours (mean scores 4.7-6.1). Ten minutes alone, however, was judged, on the average, to be significantly less serious (2.9).

Dependent Variable 5. "On a scale of 1 to 10, how high a priority should this type of call be given by Protective Services?"

Responses to the fifth question were expected to measure the effect of the experimental treatments on professional judgments of the seriousness of the situation described in the vignette relative to the full range of maltreatment that is reported to child protection agencies.

The hypotheses of the study predict that (a) scores on Dependent Variable 5 will vary inversely with the age of the child described in the vignette, and (b) scores on Dependent Variable 5 will vary positively with the amount of time the child was left alone as described in the vignette. The results of the analysis of variance are summarized in Table 17. Main effects were statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). The direction of the main effects on mean scores on the fifth dependent variable were in the predicted direction (Table 18). There was an apparently strong and dramatic curvilinear relationship between the Age factor and priority rankings. Large differences were found in the mean scores between adjacent levels of the Age factor in the lower ranges. The results of the multiple group comparisons are displayed in Table 19. Priority scores are consistent

Table 17

Judgments on Dependent Variable 5, Seriousness(Priority Ratings): Analysis of Variance

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Main effects					
Child age	868.522	4	217.131	52.798	.001
Time alone	296.111	3	98.704	24.001	.001
Interactions	79.611	12	6.634	1.613	.093
Residual	658.000	160	4.113		
Total	1902.244	179	10.627		
R = .782					
R <sup>2</sup> = .612					
Eta <sup>2</sup>					
Child age	.4624				
Time alone	.1521				

Table 18

Mean Judgment Scores on Seriousness:Priority Rating: Age of Child byTime Alone<sup>a</sup>


---

	<u>Time Alone</u>				
	10 min	1 hr	3 hr	6 hr	Total
2 yrs	6.89	9.11	8.89	9.33	8.56 (36)
5 yrs	3.44	7.33	7.33	7.78	6.47 (36)
7 yrs	2.78	4.89	5.00	7.00	4.92 (36)
9 yrs	1.33	2.11	4.44	5.67	3.39 (36)
12 yrs	1.67	1.78	1.89	4.22	2.39 (36)
<hr/>					
Total	3.22 (45)	5.04 (45)	5.51 (45)	6.80 (45)	5.14 (180)

---

<sup>a</sup>Cell N = 9

Table 19

Multiple Group Comparisons for Dependent Variable 5:  
Seriousness (Priority Ratings)

---

Tukey's H.S.D. Procedure (.05 level)

Homogeneous Subsets, Age Factor

Subset 1		
Group	12 years	9 years
Mean	2.3889	3.3889
Subset 2		
Group	9 years	7 years
Mean	3.3889	4.9167
Subset 3		
Group	7 years	5 years
Mean	4.9167	6.4722
Subset 4		
Group	2 years	
Mean	8.5556	

Homogeneous Subsets, Time Factor

Subset 1		
Group	10 minutes	
Mean	3.2222	
Subset 2		
Group	1 hour	3 hours
Mean	5.0444	5.5111
Subset 3		
Group	3 hours	6 hours
Mean	5.5111	6.8000

---

with Seriousness scores (Dependent Variable 4). Age 2 mean scores are significantly different and high (8.6 on a scale of 10). Low to moderate mean priority scores were given to the older ages. On the average, Age 5 was given a higher priority than Ages 9 and 12. The difference between mean priority rankings for Ages 7 and 12 was also found to be significant. Average priority scores on the Time factor clearly distinguished the 10 minutes group from the others. On the average, the longer periods of time alone were assigned moderate to high priority judgments (5.0-6.8) when compared to the low priority assigned to 10 minutes (3.2). Six hours alone was assigned a higher average priority ranking than 1 hour. No significant differences were found between 1 hour and 3 hours or between 3 hours and 6 hours.

#### Interaction Effects

Inspection of the cell means in Tables 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18 reveals that there were statistical interactions between the factors on each of the dependent variables. These interactions were statistically significant for Dependent Variable 1, Narrow Legal Interpretation, and Dependent Variable 2, Response of Most Protective Services Workers (Table 5 and Table 8). Statistical interaction refers to the finding that average judgments on the Age factor were different at different levels of the Time variable, and vice versa. That is, the effect of one independent variable on the dependent variable depends on the level of the other independent variable.

The nature of this statistical interaction may be illustrated for all five dependent variables by the statistics displayed in Table 6 for Dependent Variable 1, narrow legal interpretation. There was little difference between cell means for age 12, for example, at the 10 minutes, 1 hour, and 3 hours levels of the Time factor (3.00, 3.00, and 3.11, respectively). At the 6 hours level of the Time factor, the cell mean increased dramatically, however, to 6.56. Cell means for Age 2 years, by contrast, were not much affected by variation in the Time factor. Cell means for Age 2 started out relatively high and remained high across all levels of Time: 6.67, 7.78, 7.11, and 7.89.

Similarly, cell means for the first level of the Time factor (10 minutes) were at a relatively high level when the Age factor was set at Age 2 (6.67) and changed very little until the Age factor was set at Age 9. At that level the cell mean declined sharply to 3.33 and remained low through Age 12 (3.00). This interaction effect held for 1 hour and 3 hours also. Cell means for 6 hours were relatively unaffected by variation in the Age factor, however. Cell means for 6 hours were high at Age 2 and remained high across all the higher levels of Age: 7.89, 7.67, 6.33, 7.00, and 6.56.

### Background Variables

Descriptive data were collected from each subject and are summarized in Table 20. In their research on child abuse, Garrett and Rossi (1978) found that the results of vignette analysis are influenced not only by the characteristics of the objects presented for judgment but also by characteristics of the judges themselves. In light of that precedent in the related literature, the decision was made in the present study to address the question of what, if any, combinations of background variables and experimental factors might account for, or explain, more of the variation in the dependent variables than the experimental factors alone. Very little additional explanatory power was found in the background variables.

Multiple regression analysis was done of each dependent variable by the experimental factors and the background variables. The results of these analyses are summarized in Table 21.

By squaring the correlation coefficient,  $R$ , in either ANOVA or multiple regression analysis, one calculates the coefficient of determination for the statistic. This value indicates the proportion of total variation in the dependent variable accounted for, or explained by, variation in the independent variables. The data in Table 21 demonstrate that the explanatory power of the experimental factors is enhanced by the addition of background variables to the



Table 20

Characteristics of the Subjects: Child Protection  
Professionals in North Carolina, 1984

Characteristics	Percentage <sup>a</sup>
Sex	
Female	76
Male	19
Missing	5
Race	
White	74
Black	21
Native American	4
Missing	1
Service Delivery Role	
Direct Service	74
Supervisory	18
Administrative	8
Other	1
Academic major	
Social Work	33
Other	65
Missing	2
Educational Level	
Undergraduate degree only	69
Graduate degree	29
Missing	2
Parental status	
Parents	51
Non-Parents	47
Missing	2
Residence of youngest child (Average age = 12 yrs)	
With subject	39
Not with subject	12
Not applicable	46
Missing	2

Table 20 (continued)

Characteristics	Percentage <sup>a</sup>
Marital status	
Married, lives with spouse	54
Single, or not with spouse	44
Missing	2
County size	
Class II (smaller)	18
Class III	14
Class IV	36
Class V (largest)	32
Age (in years)	
22-30	25
31-35	25
36-40	25
40-64	25
Experience (in years)	
1-3	30
4-8	45
9-30	25
Percentage of time in CPS	
Less than 20	17
20 but less than 50	13
50 but less than 100	31
100	38
Missing	1
Number reports each month	
1-2	25
3-4	25
5-6	25
7-40	25

<sup>a</sup>N = 180

Table 21

Coefficients of Determination Compared for  
Dependent Variables 1 Through 5

	<u>DV1</u>	<u>DV2</u>	<u>DV3</u>	<u>DV4</u>	<u>DV5</u>	<u>N</u>
Multiple $R^2$ (based on subject and experi- mental variables)	.4328	.4113	.5603	.5989	.6063	157 <sup>a</sup>
ANOVA $R^2$ (based on experimental variables only)	<u>.4160</u>	<u>.4400</u>	<u>.5740</u>	<u>.5860</u>	<u>.6120</u>	180
Difference	+.0168	-.0287	-.0137	+.0129	-.0057	

<sup>a</sup>Smaller N due to missing values.

regression equation only with respect to Dependent Variable 1, "Narrow Legal Interpretation," and Dependent Variable 4, "Seriousness: Direct Rating." Summaries of the multiple regression analysis of these dependent variables are presented in Table 22.

Briefly, the accuracy with which neglect judgments may be predicted for "Narrow Legal Interpretation" could be enhanced slightly by including in the calculations information about the size of the county department in which the subject was employed. Similarly, by including information about the race of the subject in the calculation, one could increase slightly the accuracy of predictions of neglect judgments expressed as direct ratings of seriousness.

The zero-order correlation coefficient for subject's race with direct ratings of seriousness is low but statistically significant and negative ( $-.187, p < .01$ ). Because nonwhite subjects represent only 25% of the sample, this correlation is also considered to be important. It implies that nonwhite subjects tended to judge the vignettes as describing more serious maltreatment than white subjects. Further research is required to isolate the source of this pattern in the data.

Table 22

Regression Tables: Dependent Variables 1 and 4


---

Dependent Variable 1. Narrow Legal Interpretation by  
Age of Child, Interaction Term, and County Size

N = 157

<u>Source</u>	<u>Beta In</u>	<u>Zero-Order Correlation</u>
Age of child	-.0529	-.529 ( $p < .001$ )
Interaction term (Age x Time)	1.1619	-.372 ( $p < .001$ )
County size	-.1258	-.095 ( $p < .118$ )
$R^2 = .4328$ ( $p < .05$ )		

Dependent Variable 4, Seriousness: Direct Rating,  
by Age of Child, Time Alone, and Race

N = 157

<u>Source</u>	<u>Beta In</u>	<u>Zero-Order Correlation</u>
Age of child	-.6829	-.683 ( $p < .001$ )
Time alone	.3514	.362 ( $p < .001$ )
Race <sup>a</sup>	-.1304	-.187 ( $p < .01$ )
$R^2 = .5989$ ( $p < .05$ )		

---

<sup>a</sup>White = 1, Nonwhite = 0

## CHAPTER V

## SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One hundred eighty child protection professionals in North Carolina participated in a field experiment to test the influence of selected characteristics of the child self-care arrangement on professional judgments of neglect. The factors selected for study were age of child and amount of time left alone. These factors were selected because they figure importantly in the current debate in the family study field about the extent and effects of child self-care as a regular child-care arrangement. These factors were systematically combined in 20 nonredundant vignettes which were randomly presented to the subjects. Five measures of professional judgments of neglect were taken, and these were the five dependent measures used in this study. The data derived from these measures were used to test the hypotheses that (a) there is an inverse relationship between the age of the child in self-care and professional judgments of neglect on each dependent variable, and (b) there is a positive relationship between the amount of time the child is left in self-care and professional judgments of neglect on each dependent variable. Each hypothesis was tested for each dependent measure separately since each dependent variable was conceptualized as being oriented toward a different frame

of reference within which judgments occur. A total of 10 principal hypotheses were tested. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the hypotheses that the means of the experimental groups on each dependent variable were equal. The results of the analyses uniformly demonstrated that the age and time factors influenced professional judgments of neglect on each of the five dependent measures, that the observed effects were statistically significant, and that the experimentally induced effects were in the directions predicted by the major hypotheses of the study. In brief, the findings clearly supported each of the 10 hypotheses that were tested.

The factorial experimental design was successfully applied to the research problem. Usable data were collected and meaningful results were obtained. Vignette analysis, a research method, was successfully used within the research design. The subjects were able to respond accurately and intelligibly to minimal information about self-care situations.

The fact that a nonrandom sample of convenience was used is irrelevant to the validity of the experimental results. Its use does dictate that caution should be used in attempting to generalize beyond the present sample, however.

The data showed that professional judgments of neglect in self-care are influenced by the interaction of the Age and Time factors. On the average, judgments based on the age of the child were moderated by the information given in the

vignette about the amount of time the child was alone. It appears that many professionals believe that child self-care, in the absence of concurrent abuse or other actual harm, is not a protective services matter where school-age children are concerned. In those situations involving preschoolers, however, average neglect judgments indicate that protective services intervention is usually appropriate.

The influence of county size on neglect judgments requires comment. The results of the multiple regression showed that neglect judgments varied inversely with the size of the county in which the subject was found. To the extent that county size represents a rural-urban dimension, the statistical results run counter to what one might expect given the greater risks for harm inherent in urban living. Relatively more severe judgments from small county professionals may reflect a greater sense of shared community responsibility for all the children. Urban workers may feel no less responsible or protective than their rural counterparts but may also see more and more varied situations which have the combined effect of increasing their tolerance for various types of family situations. Because descriptions of each county's client caseload were not included in the study, no comparisons can be made or conclusions drawn about the similarities and differences between the urban and rural protective services settings. One may conjecture, however, that there are important differences between the two. These differences may be reflected in the kinds of



parental behaviors that are considered "normal" in each setting and those that require agency intervention. Further research is needed to uncover the basis for the influence of county size on judgments of neglect under a narrow legal interpretation.

The subjects in this study are probably not unique among professionals in their belief that a 2-year-old boy is too young to be left alone and unsupervised. There is a need, however, for more systematically developed knowledge about the circumstances and condition of preschoolers who are left alone regularly for 1 or more hours at a time. Some of the relevant data may be available in protective service files. The present research indicates, however, that not all reports are investigated. It is also reasonable to assume that not all of these children are actually reported to the protective agency but that many of them continue in informal self-care arrangements unknown to the authorities. The necessary research will have to be done neighborhood by neighborhood since the children may be difficult to locate. The insight gained from a series of such studies would bring the issues into sharper focus.

Future research might also fruitfully address the family variables that are associated with successful and unsuccessful self-care experiences. Studies of the characteristics and outcomes of families who were reported for neglect due to lack of supervision would be instructive. Comparison

studies of the characteristics and outcomes of families who use self-care regularly for their children would highlight important similarities and differences. In this study, for example, the vignette described a male child who "lived alone with his mother." This fact about family structure was presented as a constant and was part of each subject's vignette. It is not possible, however, to determine the effect this information had on the judgment-making process. Because of the large  $R^2$  statistic obtained for each measure, it is probable that the effect was minimal. Nonetheless, it is likely that many subjects made certain assumptions about the reasons for mother absence, the quality and dynamics of the mother-son relationship, and the socioeconomic status of the family, and that these assumptions colored their judgments.

Additional investigations of professional judgments using the factorial experimental design but focused on different family and child characteristics would further enhance our understanding of how important age is in predicting professional judgments about child self-care arrangements. For example, one might investigate the effect of such variables as the sex of the self-care child, the child's emotional reaction to being in self-care (does he or she feel pride at being "in charge" or is fear the predominant feeling), the presence of younger or older siblings, their age and condition, and the parents' rationale or justification for using self-care.

The present research demonstrated the feasibility of studying these and related issues in protective services and child self-care with vignette analysis. Experimental design is the art of achieving interpretable comparisons between experimental groups (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). The strength of the present research design lies in its control of extraneous variables and the assurance it provides that group differences are, in fact, attributable to the effects of the experimental variables. This research may be fruitfully extended by the use of a fully developed factorial survey research design. As Rossi and his colleagues have amply demonstrated (Rossi & Nock, 1982), the factorial survey design and vignette analysis are efficient approaches to the investigation of a variety of issues centered on how families relate to communities. Meaningful community surveys of beliefs and attitudes toward self-care could be made quite readily through the application of these research methods.

It is apparent that the "latchkey child," that is, a child who is regularly left without direct adult supervision before or after school (Strother, 1984), is not necessarily a "neglected child." This is consistent with the results of research on the effects of self-care and maternal absence on school-age children. There, the weight of the evidence is that, on many generally accepted measures of developmental progress, children in self-care fare no better or worse than children in adult care (Rodman, Pratto, & Nelson, in press).

The findings of the present study neither support nor refute a policy of permitting parents of school-age children to choose self-care as an alternative substitute child care arrangement. What is needed by policy makers, parents, protective service specialists, and child advocates is reliable research knowledge about what competencies children should possess before being expected to undertake a self-care experience, and about how those competencies develop and whether or not they can be taught.

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APPENDIX A  
FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER QUESTIONNAIRE

**FAMILY RESEARCH CENTER QUESTIONNAIRE:****Child Protective Services**

The Family Research Center of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro is studying children and families to learn more about how they function and to try to find new ways of providing help. One area of interest is in the kinds of child care arrangements made by families. At times, reports are made to child protective service agencies about some of the child care arrangements. It is then the responsibility of the agency to make judgments about whether the situation represents child maltreatment. In order to learn more about these important judgments, we are turning to you for your assistance.

In this study you will be asked to make professional judgments about family situations that might have been reported to protective services. You will be asked a series of questions after each situation. We would like you to respond to each question. The confidentiality of the information you provide is assured. All reports will be based upon grouped data, so that no individual's responses can be identified. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

If you want to receive a copy of the final summary, please write your name and address below. Then, before you leave today, return this page separately.

Thank you very much for your assistance.

Hyman Rodman, PhD, Director  
Family Research Center  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Henry Otten, ACSW, Doctoral Student  
Department of Child Development and Family Relations  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Please read each Situation carefully, then answer the questions.

**Situation A**

4.6

A concerned relative has called about John, age 9. John is an only child and lives alone with his mother. John is usually home alone from about 3:00 p.m. until about 3:10 p.m. John's mother says she thinks he is old enough to look after himself and that he is alright being alone. The caller is afraid something might happen. The caller had no other information.

(Directions: For Questions 1 through 3, please select and mark the one best answer from the statements that follow each question.)

1. Under a narrow interpretation of the child protection law, what response would your agency make to this call?

- ☐ The caller would be informed that there is no basis for agency intervention.
- ☐ The caller would be advised to call back if the situation worsens, and no other action would be taken.
- ☐ The caller would be referred to another community agency.
- ☐ The caller would be referred to the regular services intake unit of your agency.
- ☐ A formal complaint would not be taken, but the mother would be contacted and cautioned.
- ☐ A dependency complaint would be taken.
- ☐ A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 72 hours.
- ☐ A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.
- ☐ An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 24 hours.
- ☐ An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.

2. In practice, what response would most child protection workers make to this call?

☐ The caller would be informed that there is no basis for agency intervention.  
☐ The caller would be advised to call back if the situation worsens, and no other action would be taken.  
☐ The caller would be referred to another community agency.  
☐ The caller would be referred to the regular services intake unit of the agency.  
☐ A formal complaint would not be taken, but the mother would be contacted and cautioned.  
☐ A dependency complaint would be taken.  
☐ A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 72 hours.  
☐ A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.  
☐ An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 24 hours.  
☐ An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.

3. Setting aside for the moment the requirements of current state and local policies, what response do you think ought to be made to this call?

☐ The caller should be informed that there is no basis for agency intervention.  
☐ The caller should be advised to call back if the situation worsens, and no other action should be taken.  
☐ The caller should be referred to another community agency.  
☐ The caller should be referred to the regular services intake unit of the agency.  
☐ A formal complaint should not be taken, but the mother should be contacted and cautioned.  
☐ A dependency complaint should be taken.  
☐ A neglect complaint should be taken and the child should be seen within 72 hours.  
☐ A neglect complaint should be taken and the child should be seen immediately.  
☐ An abuse complaint should be taken and the child should be seen within 24 hours.  
☐ An abuse complaint should be taken and the child should be seen immediately.

4. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning that no maltreatment exists and with 10 meaning that the maltreatment is very serious, how serious is the child maltreatment described by the caller? Draw a circle around the number that best represents your answer.

No	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Very Serious
Maltreatment											Maltreatment

5. On a scale of 1 to 10, how high a priority should this type of call be given by Protective Services? Please circle your answer below.

Very High	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	Very Low
Priority											Priority

GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE

**Situation B**

10.16

You have received a call from a concerned relative about 2 year old Vic and Robert, his brother, who is 5. The caller says that the boys are usually alone for a couple of hours while their parents are at work. The boys frequently stay at home by themselves. The caller has said something about this to the boys' mother but she thinks they will be O.K. since they are alone only a short time. The caller is afraid the boys are going to get hurt or in trouble if something is not done.

(Directions: For questions 6 through 8, please select and mark the one best answer from the statements that follow each question.)

6. Under a narrow interpretation of the child protection law, what response would your agency make to this call?

- ☐ The caller would be informed that there is no basis for agency intervention.
- ☐ The caller would be advised to call back if the situation worsens, and no other action would be taken.
- ☐ The caller would be referred to another community agency.
- ☐ The caller would be referred to the regular services intake unit of your agency.
- ☐ A formal complaint would not be taken, but the mother would be contacted and cautioned.
- ☐ A dependency complaint would be taken.
- ☐ A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 72 hours.
- ☐ A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.
- ☐ An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 24 hours.
- ☐ An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.

7. In practice, what response would most child protection workers make to this call?

- ☐ The caller would be informed that there is no basis for agency intervention.  
☐ The caller would be advised to call back if the situation worsens, and no other action would be taken.  
☐ The caller would be referred to another community agency.  
☐ The caller would be referred to the regular services intake unit of the agency.  
☐ A formal complaint would not be taken, but the mother would be contacted and cautioned.  
☐ A dependency complaint would be taken.  
☐ A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 72 hours.  
☐ A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.  
☐ An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 24 hours.  
☐ An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.

8. Setting aside for the moment the requirements of current state and local policies, what response do you think ought to be made to this call?

- ☐ The caller should be informed that there is no basis for agency intervention.  
☐ The caller should be advised to call back if the situation worsens, and no other action should be taken.  
☐ The caller should be referred to another community agency.  
☐ The caller should be referred to the regular services intake unit of the agency.  
☐ A formal complaint should not be taken, but the mother should be contacted and cautioned.  
☐ A dependency complaint should be taken.  
☐ A neglect complaint should be taken and the child should be seen within 72 hours.  
☐ A neglect complaint should be taken and the child should be seen immediately.  
☐ An abuse complaint should be taken and the child should be seen within 24 hours.  
☐ An abuse complaint should be taken and the child should be seen immediately.

9. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning that no maltreatment exists and with 10 meaning that the maltreatment is very serious, how serious is the child maltreatment described by the caller? Draw a circle around the number that best represents your answer.

No Maltreatment      1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10      Very Serious Maltreatment

10. On a scale of 1 to 10, how high a priority should this type of call be given by Protective Services? Please circle your answer below.

Very High Priority      10   9   8   7   6   5   4   3   2   1      Very Low Priority

GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE

## Situation C

19.24.26

A call has been received from a concerned relative of Chris J., a 9 year old girl. Chris's mother went back to work full time in January. Since then, Chris has usually been home alone for about 3 hours in the afternoon. The caller thinks this is not a good situation for Chris. When the caller has approached Chris's parents about it, however, they have said that Chris is alone only a short time. Their attitude seems to be: what could happen? The caller has also talked with Chris. The child seems to be comfortable with these arrangements and expresses feelings of self-confidence and of being trusted to take care of things while the parents are away. The caller then decided to call your office.

(Directions: For Questions ( 11 through 13, please select and mark the one best answer from the statements that follow each question.)

11. Under a narrow interpretation of the child protection law, what response would your agency make to this call?

- ☐ The caller would be informed that there is no basis for agency intervention.
- ☐ The caller would be advised to call back if the situation worsens, and no other action would be taken.
- ☐ The caller would be referred to another community agency.
- ☐ The caller would be referred to the regular services intake unit of your agency.
- ☐ A formal complaint would not be taken, but the parents would be contacted and cautioned.
- ☐ A dependency complaint would be taken.
- ☐ A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 72 hours.
- ☐ A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.
- ☐ An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 24 hours.
- ☐ An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.

12. In practice, what response would most child protection workers make to this call?

- ☐ The caller would be informed that there is no basis for agency intervention.
- ☐ The caller would be advised to call back if the situation worsens, and no other action would be taken.
- ☐ The caller would be referred to another community agency.
- ☐ The caller would be referred to the regular services intake unit of the agency.
- ☐ A formal complaint would not be taken, but the parents would be called and cautioned.
- ☐ A dependency complaint would be taken.
- ☐ A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 72 hours.
- ☐ A neglect complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.
- ☐ An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen within 24 hours.
- ☐ An abuse complaint would be taken and the child would be seen immediately.

13. Setting aside for the moment the requirements of current state and local policies, what response do you think ought to be made to this call?

- ☐ The caller should be informed that there is no basis for agency intervention.  
☐ The caller should be advised to call back if the situation worsens, and no other action should be taken.  
☐ The caller should be referred to another community agency.  
☐ The caller should be referred to the regular services intake unit of the agency.  
☐ A formal complaint should not be taken, but the parents should be contacted and cautioned.  
☐ A dependency complaint should be taken.  
☐ A neglect complaint should be taken and the child should be seen within 72 hours.  
☐ A neglect complaint should be taken and the child should be seen immediately.  
☐ An abuse complaint should be taken and the child should be seen within 24 hours.  
☐ An abuse complaint should be taken and the child should be seen immediately.

14. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning that no maltreatment exists and with 10 meaning that the maltreatment is very serious, how serious is the child maltreatment described by the caller? Draw a circle around the number that best represents your answer.

No Maltreatment    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10    Very Serious Maltreatment

15. On a scale of 1 to 10, how high a priority should this type of call be given by Protective Services? Please circle your answer below.

Very High Priority    10   9   8   7   6   5   4   3   2   1    Very Low Priority

16. Lack of proper supervision is included in the definition of child neglect in all jurisdictions. Yet, when surveyed, many parents of young children consistently report having their children take care of themselves as their primary child care arrangement when they are away from home. In light of this apparent contradiction between what the law says and what many parents actually choose to do, what position do you think the child protection agencies and professionals should take? Please write your answer in the space below.

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Now we want to ask you a few questions about yourself.

1. What is your primary position with the agency called?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you consider your position to be primarily:  
  - \_\_\_ a. Direct service to clients \_\_\_ b. Supervisory \_\_\_ c. Administrative
3. About what percent of your regular work week is assigned to handling child protective services matters?  
  - \_\_\_ Less than 20% \_\_\_ 50% but less than 100%
  - \_\_\_ 20% but less than 50% \_\_\_ 100%
4. How many years during your career have you done work directly related to child protective services? \_\_\_\_\_ years
5. What is your race? \_\_\_ Black \_\_\_ White \_\_\_ Native American \_\_\_ Oriental  
 What is your age? \_\_\_ Years What is your sex? \_\_\_ Female \_\_\_ Male
6. Are you a parent? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No (If you checked "No," go to Question 7)  
 Age of youngest child: \_\_\_ Years Does this child live with you? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No
7. Are you currently married and living with your spouse? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No
8. a. What is the highest academic or professional degree you have received?  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 b. In what discipline or major area was that degree taken?  
 \_\_\_\_\_
9. a. On the average, how many cases do you investigate each month in which the primary complaint or problem is that the child has been left alone to take care of himself or herself? (If you checked 2b or 2c, answer for your unit or agency.) \_\_\_\_\_  
 b. What usually happens as a result of the investigation in these cases?  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

APPENDIX B  
LETTER OF INTRODUCTION



STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES  
DIVISION OF SOCIAL SERVICES  
325 N. SALISBURY STREET / RALEIGH 27611

JAMES B. HUNT JR.  
GOVERNOR  
SARAH T. MORROW, M.D., M.P.H.  
SECRETARY  
DEPT HUMAN RESOURCES

July 16, 1984

JOHN M. SYRIA  
DIRECTOR  
DIV. SOCIAL SERVICES  
TEL (919) 733-3055  
IN REPLY REFER TO CODE

Dear County Director of Social Services:

Subject: Research Study Conducted by Henry Otten, ACSW

The attached letter has been received by the North Carolina Division of Social Services from Mr. Henry Otten. As you can see, Mr. Otten has developed a study in the area of Child Protective Services; and he is interested in obtaining information from your CPS staff.

In addition to his doctoral work at UNC-G, Mr. Otten has an MSW from Tulane and an AB from Davidson College. He is employed in the Guilford area Mental Health program as a clinical social worker. His background includes eight years of work at Barium Springs, six years as a social worker with Mecklenburg DSS and three years with United Day Care Services in Greensboro.

The Division is providing Mr. Otten with a list of the names of County Directors of Social Services. He will be contacting some of you and asking for your support. Mr. Otten is aware that a number of research projects are underway in the area of child abuse and neglect and is sensitive to the demands these projects make upon your staff. He will be most appreciative of any assistance you can provide.

Sincerely,

Bonnie M. Cramer  
Assistant Director for Program Administration

BMC:SG:md

Attachment

JUN 28 1984

710 Northridge St.  
Greensboro, N.C. 27403  
June 25, 1984

Miss Sue Glasby, Head  
Children's Services Branch  
325 N. Salisbury St.  
Raleigh, N.C. 27611

Dear Miss Glasby:

Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule last Friday to talk with me about my current research interests. I am looking forward to receiving the manual materials and thank you for making them available to me.

I would like to have a letter of support or introduction from Mr. Syria to the County Directors since I believe this will facilitate the process of making appointments to meet with local protective services staff. I appreciate your willingness to consider my request for this support and the following information is provided per our conversation. A copy of my resume is also enclosed to establish my professional credentials.

I am in the doctoral program in Child Development and Family Relations at UNC-G. Dr. My Rodman is my major professor. He is also director of the Family Research Center, UNC-G. The Center is studying children and families to learn more about how they function and to try to find new ways of providing help. My area of interest is in the kinds of child care arrangements families make. At times, reports are made to child protective services about these child care arrangements. At that point it is the agency's responsibility to make judgments about the seriousness of the situation and whether it represents abuse, neglect, or dependency. In order to learn more about these important judgments and the impact on the judgment process of varying characteristics of the child care arrangements, I am turning to child protection professionals for assistance.

In this study, child protection staff will be asked to make professional judgments about family situations that might have been reported to them. The situations will be presented in the form of vignettes in which two or more variables of interest will have been completely crossed. Respondents will record their professional judgments on rating scales. There will be no personally identifying data on the answer sheets and participation will be voluntary.

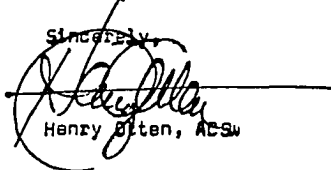
My intention is to contact County Directors of Social Services and request permission to meet with their protective services staff during a regularly scheduled staff meeting. The data collection instrument has been field tested under realistic conditions and can be completed satisfactorily within 30 minutes. Thus, I can be in and out of the local

agency with minimal disruption of routine. I plan to collect my data during July and August.

There will be no involvement of actual clientele nor will it be necessary to read case records. Those staff who participated in the field test found the experience to be interesting, thought-provoking, and relevant to their professional concerns. I will provide copies of the research report to the Division, County Departments, and individual respondents who ask for one. I will also be available to provide in-service training for the Division and County Departments on issues related to the research.

Thank you, again, for your help. Please call me at 919-373-3630 should you need additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "H. Otten", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is stylized and cursive.

Henry Otten, ACSW

cc: H. Rodman