

Scars of the Past – Stories: Creating A Short Story Collection Highlighting Childhood Emotional Neglect and Its Impacts in Adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN) is described as a parent's failure to respond enough to their child's emotional needs. Although the effects can be severe, it is rarely studied compared to other kinds of childhood abuse and maltreatment. The writers hope to raise awareness about the topic through a short story collection which consists of four stories. Each story shows different types of emotionally neglectful parents, its impacts on the victims as adults, and how they overcome their situation using Dr. Jonice Webb's empirical insights on CEN as a theoretical framework. The protagonists: Amanda, Brian, Christine, and Daniel, are people in their early twenties who go through their lives trying to deal with the impact of childhood emotional neglect that their parents gave them. The stories show a few types of emotionally neglectful parents: the combination of the narcissistic parent and the achievement/perfection focused parent, the permissive parent, the workaholic parent, and child as parent. The impacts in adulthood materialize in these stories include hiding emotions and lack of self-love, lack of self-discipline, lack of self-esteem, and being overly responsible. The solutions pursued by the main characters are learning to say no, improving their sense of self-discipline, self-soothing, and trying to put themselves first.

Keywords: awareness, childhood emotional neglect (CEN), emotionally neglectful parents, impacts in adulthood, solutions

INTRODUCTION

Everything that happens in a person's childhood shapes the kind of adult they become. However, *what did not* happen when someone was a child has the same or even more power in forming who they become as an adult (Webb, 2012, p.14, emphasis in original). This invisible force that leaves well-functioning adults feeling unfulfilled or unhappy is called childhood emotional neglect. According to the therapist and author Dr. Jonice Webb, childhood emotional neglect or CEN is "a parent's failure to respond *enough* to a child's emotional needs" (n.d., emphasis in original).

While it is not as widely studied as other kinds of childhood abuse and maltreatment, a meta-analysis done in 2012 managed to provide an estimation of the prevalence of neglect, both physical and emotional, through a meta-analysis. Although the meta-analysis used references from various studies, most of them discussed other kinds of childhood abuse and maltreatment instead of CEN specifically, but that is part of the meta-analysis that will be highlighted. Using the samples, statistics revealed that about 18% of children have become victims of childhood emotional neglect, with a concerning global prevalence of 184 per 1,000 cases (Stoltenborgh et. al., 2012). If childhood emotional neglect is undiagnosed and goes unaddressed, it could surface a variety of effects that will possibly last for a lifetime. Experiences in early childhood affect the way people behave and interact as adults (Marston, 2020). When a child becomes regularly

exposed to emotional neglect, it may disrupt the way they perceive things as they grow up. Without proper diagnosis and treatment, it will cause “long term deficiencies in our ability to understand our emotions, manage our emotions, and be in healthy relationships” (Marston, 2020).

The creative work designed in this paper aims to explore the types of parents who emotionally neglect their children, the effects of childhood emotional neglect on victims as adults, and how to overcome them. All of which is done within the context of Indonesian setting and culture to make it more relevant to Indonesian readers.

A short story collection is chosen as the form because short stories do not beat around the bush. There “is no room for fluff, unless fluff is the point” (Kowalczyk-Harper, 2015). Due to the limited word count of a short story, it is challenging to deliver a piece of writing that states the main issue clearly while also piquing the readers’ interest. The next reason behind a short story collection as the chosen form is because it is easier to read. Due to each story’s individual plot, readers are not obliged to read the entire collection all in one sitting (Kowalczyk-Harper, 2015). Therefore, they can read one story at a time, and they do not have to face the difficulties of remembering what happened in the previous one.

The genre of the creative work is psychological realism. It “focuses intensively on the interior life of characters, representing their subjective thoughts, feelings, memories, and desires” (Logan, 2011). Texts that use psychological realism serve its purpose by depicting a realistic, meaningful, and enriching world through an in-depth understanding and portrayal of the human mind and personality (Sen, 2020). Through this particular genre, the short story collection will display the effects of childhood emotional neglect inflicted by the main characters’ parents growing up. Those impacts will influence how each of the protagonists process their thoughts and feelings, resulting in the actions they take.

Serving as the theoretical framework is Dr. Jonice Webb’s book, *Running on Empty: Overcome Your Childhood Emotional Neglect* (2012), which provided guidelines to explore the different types of emotionally neglectful parents, the impacts on victims in their adulthood, and how they overcome their situation.

There are various types of emotionally neglectful parents, and Dr. Webb has elaborated on twelve in her book, which are based on each of her patients’ cases. Out of the twelve categories, five will be implemented in creating the creative work, which are as follows (Webb, 2012):

1. The Narcissistic Parent
They demand perfection from their children in order to make themselves look good. They see their children as an extension of themselves.
2. The Achievement/Perfection Focused Parent
They pressure their children to achieve what they want instead of what the children want.
3. The Permissive Parent
They do not provide boundaries or limitations for their children.
4. The Workaholic Parent
They often work long hours, and tend to pay inadequate attention to their children’s needs and feelings.
5. Child as Parent

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They allow, encourage, or even force their child to step up into parental functions because they are unable to. Usually, there is some sort of hardship which forces the child to be put in this situation, such as death in the family, financial struggles, and various other factors.

Although the victims grow up into seemingly normal adults, the events of CEN leave a scar that they unknowingly carry into adulthood. Most of the time, they have no clue that their parents' behavior played a part, and "they tend to blame themselves for whatever difficulties they may be experiencing in life" (Webb, 2012, p. 77). The following impacts (Webb, 2012) will appear in the creative work:

1. Hiding emotions
The effect of the narcissistic parent. Since they are used to following their parents' demands, the children associate expressing their feelings as being selfish or inconsiderate.
2. Lack of self-love
The effect of the achievement/perfection focused parent. The children will grow up with a lack of self-love and put their parents' happiness first, all to accomplish what their parents expect of them.
3. Lack of self-discipline
The impact of the permissive parent. The lack of boundaries allows the children to behave as they please.
4. Low self-esteem
The impact of the workaholic parent. By putting their careers first, parents make their children feel that they are not as important, therefore affecting their self-esteem.
5. Being overly responsible
The effect of a child as a parent. Since they take over the parental duties, the children miss out on their childhood and grow up into overly responsible adults who have trouble identifying their emotions, their wants, or if either matters.

To help adult victims of childhood emotional neglect, Dr. Jonice Webb has explained four major areas that could help improve their self-care skills. Three are chosen to be applied in creative work because they are the most relevant to each storyline. They are (Webb, 2012):

1. Learning to Nurture Yourself
There are four steps in learning self-nurturance, but the one that will be highlighted is putting yourself first. To do so, one needs to learn to say no, ask for help, and prioritize themselves.
2. Improving Self-Discipline
The absence of a parental voice to guide them leads children to create their own, which is not as balanced as a parent's would be, therefore interfering with their schedule and habits. To mitigate this, one needs to improve their self-discipline.
3. Self-Soothing
Self-soothing is a strategy to relieve stress by doing activities that focus on the five senses to distract the child from their thoughts, feelings, and impulses (Schwartz, 2022). This strategy can be helpful in situations where emotions are hard to manage.

Dr. Jonice Webb did not specifically mention if forms of external support may benefit the victims during recovery. However, she did elaborate that emotionally neglected children can grow up to be counter-dependent. People who are counter-dependent “go to great lengths to avoid asking for help, to not appear, or feel needy” (Webb, 2012, p.86-87). Although most victims of CEN may not feel comfortable asking for help, Webb encouraged them to reach out to anyone they trust or a mental health professional if they ever run into problems or difficulties. This aspect would materialize in the creative work when some protagonists respond positively to the help or support provided by others.

The short story collection tells the story of Amanda, Brian, Christine, and Daniel. All of these characters are people in their early twenties who are victims of childhood emotional neglect. Each of the stories portray their parent’s emotionally neglectful behavior, the impacts of CEN towards them as adults, and the approaches they take to recover from the pain of having to endure CEN growing up.

CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

Theme

The theme of the short story collection is that mental health can be harmed through remarks, actions, as well as in actions that happen repetitively over time. Each of the stories in the collection will show the readers how words, behaviors, and lack of actions can greatly affect someone’s mental wellbeing, especially when done repeatedly in an extended period of time. In this case, the childhood emotional neglect that the main protagonists endures since their youth will be the main cause of their declining mental health.

Plot

Below are four different plots for the stories.

Short of Perfect

The story starts with Amanda heading to the student lounge after class, about to start an assignment, showing the readers what kind of high-achieving student she is. There, she meets her crush, who invites her to his birthday get-together; the point of attack in the plot structure which starts the whole rising action. Later, she gets a call from her mother, Liana, asking about her grades and GPA. Overwhelmed by the pressure to increase her GPA to her mother’s standards, Amanda hangs up. A couple days later, she decides to ask for Liana’s permission to go to her crush’s event, which gets denied. That evening, after getting encouragement from her favorite song and her senior friend, Amanda feels enlightened, but still hesitant about disobeying her mother. The next day, she stays at her dorm, watching her friends have fun at her crush’s birthday through Instagram stories. Unable to take it anymore, she takes a risk and decides to go out. When she returns in the evening, Liana is there, furious. The two argue until, at the climax of the story, it is revealed that the reason why Liana is so adamant about Amanda’s academics is because of her own regret of not doing so in her youth. The story ends with the mother and daughter making amends.

Stranded

Brian is about to go out when his parents ask if he would like a job, but he tells them to discuss it later. He then meets up with his friends, where one of them reveals that he got employed. Brian congratulates him, joking about how he will be a corporate slave, but the friend—a year younger—sarcastically responds that it is better than being 24 and unemployed. The point of attack happens when the next day, Brian’s parents tell him that their good friend is looking for an employee, assuring him that he will get in because of nepotism. He agrees and passes the news to his girlfriend, Erika, who further encourages him. After two weeks of work,

he finds himself struggling; the start of the rising action. When he is at risk of getting fired, an argument ensues with his parents and girlfriend, who is disappointed and says that she will end their relationship if he cannot get his act together. Determined to make things right, he gets a chance to redeem himself by taking someone else's part in a team project, and he can keep his job if he is successful. During the preparations, however, he hangs out with his friends again, only to get distracted by his task. His friends tease him, saying how the old Brian does not care about work, making him realize that all of this is his own fault, the result of having permissive parents who let him do whatever he wanted growing up. On the day of the project presentation, he presents his part while also worrying if what he has done is enough. He is relieved when the higher-ups say that his part stands out, and his supervisor tells him to keep up the good work, which serves as the plot's climax. The story ends with Brian calling Erika, telling her to not get a new boyfriend, implying that he is not getting fired.

Not Their Job

The exposition and point of attack overlaps at the beginning of the story where Christine is doing the final fitting for her kebaya when her junior friend says that her parents must be proud of her walking at the commencement ceremony with magna cum laude honors. She just smiles, knowing that her workaholic parents do not feel that way as made apparent by how she, although their only child, almost always comes second after their job. Marking the beginning of the rising action is when on the next day, Christine sends them a message through WhatsApp, reminding them to attend her graduation tomorrow. When they do not respond after a few hours, she contacts their assistants, asking them to help lighten her parents' workload so they could spare their time to attend her graduation. Later in the evening, her parents reply to her message, saying that they will try their best to come. On the morning of her graduation, they tell her that they have to head to work first. They promise to attend, and Christine pressures them to keep that promise, since they kept breaking them as she was growing up. She heads to campus with her driver, and during the ceremony, she is heartbroken to find out that her parents did not attend due to work circumstances; the climax of the story. When she arrives home, her loyal long-time helper comforts her. Christine then goes into her room and sends texts to her family group chat expressing her disappointment and pent-up frustration. She then hops into the warm bath her helper has prepared for her, trying to calm and soothe herself amid the tears. After taking a bath, she deletes the texts she sent—her parents have not read them anyway, and those texts will not make a difference. Ending the story is Christine hoping that they will come around on her next milestone.

9-Year-Gap Dad

The story starts with readers learning how close and caring Daniel is toward his sister, Jess. She reminds him that her singing competition is next Friday, and that her instructor asks her to come and practice thrice a week. He nods and says he will take her, while in his mind, he is figuring out how to balance between fulfilling his responsibilities to her and finding a job; this marks the point of attack. It is Sunday, and within the week, Daniel has let go of two interview offers because they clashed with Jess' vocal lessons. However, when she asks about his job hunt, he says everything is going fine, hiding the fact that he is struggling. The rising action continues. On Tuesday, as he waits for Jess to get out of school, he receives an email from his dream company, scheduling an interview on Friday afternoon. He is ecstatic, but then remembers that Jess' competition is around the same time on the same day. Jess starts getting suspicious about his demeanor, but he plays it off. Later that night when she enters his room, she catches him rushing to close his laptop, covering the fact that he was re-reading the interview offer. Jess has to urge him to come clean numerous times before he finally pours out his worries while still telling her that he will never miss her competition. She assures him that she is not a kid anymore, and after having him take care of her since she was young as their parents have to deal with their family's struggling finances, she believes he should start doing things for himself. After thinking long and hard, Daniel decides to do the interview. The climax occurs on

the day of the interview. Daniel is already at the office when Jess suddenly calls, saying that she left her flashdisk with her backing track at home. Daniel is about to go and get it for her, risking missing his interview, when she stops him, saying that she will figure it out then hangs up. He waits anxiously for her to call him back, and when she finally does, she already has the situation under control. The story ends when he realizes that Jess is not a child anymore, and that he can truly start prioritizing himself without thinking that he is failing her.

Characters

Main Characters:

Amanda, 20 years old, is an only child. She has short bob black hair, deep brown eyes, and is 164 cm tall. Amanda is very bright and diligent, partially due to her mother's high expectations of her academic achievements. Due to her focus in her studies, she reluctantly rarely hangs out with her peers. In reality, Amanda really wants a taste of freedom so she could go out with them every once in a while, but her demanding mother never allows it, saying that it will only distract her from what truly matters, which is her grades.

Brian, 24 years old, is an only child. He has an undercut hairstyle, a slit on his left brow, black eyes, and is 178 cm tall. He is Chinese-Indonesian. Ever since he was a teenager, his parents gave him the freedom to do whatever he pleases, which leads to his reckless behavior. When he enters university, Brian uses his time to hang out with his buddies—smoking and drinking—resulting in the decline of his grades. Brian graduated four semesters late from his peers with an average GPA that he achieved by paying someone to do his assignments. When his job and, consequently, romantic relationship are on the line, he aims to better himself and be a more disciplined individual.

Christine, 22 years old, is an only child. She has long black hair, black eyes, and is 167 cm tall. She is Chinese-Indonesian. She comes from an upper class family—her father a businessman and her mother a lawyer. Since they are occupied with their careers, neither is able to give Christine the love and attention she needed growing up. Due to being under the care of a nanny her whole childhood, she tries her best to get her parents' attention at every opportunity. However, she never received the validation she seeks, which makes her work even harder. Christine is clever, always placing top three everytime she gets her report card during school, and she is graduating university with a GPA of 3.9.

Daniel, 23 years old, is the firstborn child. He has short black hair that he always styles side parted, deep brown eyes, and is 181 cm tall. He is Chinese-Indonesian. He has a 9-year gap with his younger sister, Jessica. Even though they had a nanny, their parents always reminded him that Jessica is his responsibility, since he is the eldest. Since their father's company got scammed, their parents are hardly home, trying to earn back what they lost. When he starts driving his own motorcycle in high school, he starts taking care of everything for Jess. After graduating university, he aims to find a proper job, but finds it difficult to balance with prioritizing Jess and her needs.

Supporting characters:

Liana, 46 years old, is Amanda's mother. She is obsessed with shaping Amanda into a better version of herself, making sure that she focuses on her studies and gets the best grades. This is rooted from Liana's regret over her own youth, where she did not study well and earned bad grades, leading to her facing difficulties in securing a proper and stable job.

Erika, 23 years old, is Brian's girlfriend. She graduated university a year before him, and is currently working as a food and beverage manager at one of Surabaya's luxury hotels.

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She has been dating Brian since her 5th semester, and she has been trying to help him fix his bad habits, but to no avail. She wants to get married and build a family before she turns 27.

Brian's parents. Antonius, 57 years old, and Nieke, 55 years old. Ever since Brian was a teenager, both start letting him do whatever he wants, because they agree that boys should be free to live their lives and make mistakes while they are still young. However, their permissiveness leads to him being too irresponsible. When Brian is at risk of getting fired, they scold him and push him to make things right, since they think that he is now old enough to know better.

Christine's parents. Andreas, 53 years old, and Anastasia, 52 years old. They are a businessman and a lawyer, respectively, who married late in life because they were focusing on their careers. Even after their daughter was born, they are still career-driven, leading them to unconsciously neglect her.

Esti, 42 years old, is a helper who works for Christine's family. She has been working there since Christine was a child, therefore knowing the family dynamics. Pitying Christine who grew up with the absence of her parents, Esti tries her best to help her see this through.

Jessica, 15 years old, is Daniel's sister. She has a tight bond with him, since he is the one who has been taking care of her. She loves to sing but she loves her brother more since she realizes how much he has done for her as the replacement parent figure.

Conflict

This creative work will include two kinds of conflict. The first is person against self, which are "internal battles that characters wage within themselves; these are internal issues that affect their actions, motivations and interactions with other characters" (Lavanya, 2021). This is the predominant conflict in the stories, where the main characters will often find themselves struggling to identify their own emotions and needs, which affects their sense of self-compassion and self-discipline. The second kind is person against person, where the characters "will be opposed by or will oppose the actions, reactions, motivations of another character or characters" (Lavanya, 2021). In the creative work, this type of conflict will appear in "Short of Perfect", where Amanda and Liana bicker, and in "Stranded", where Brian argues with his parents and girlfriend.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper is showing the types of emotionally neglectful parents, the effects of CEN in victims as adults, and methods to overcome the impacts through devising a short story collection set in Indonesia. First, there are five different kinds of emotionally neglectful parents in the creative work. In the first story, Liana, Amanda's mother, is a combination of the narcissistic parent and the achievement/perfection focused parent. The narcissistic side is shown when she pressures Amanda to study more and achieve a higher GPA than the one Amanda currently has, so she could brag to her friends that her daughter is brilliant to make herself look like a successful parent. The achievement/perfection aspect can be seen when Liana pressures Amanda to achieve a GPA according to her standards because she wants Amanda to succeed in life, since she failed to do so in her youth. In the second story, Brian's parents are the permissive type, not setting any rules or boundaries for him and letting him do whatever he wants. In the third story, Christine has workaholic parents who miss out on her life, missing special occasions as she grew up. In the final story, the type of neglectful parent is child as parent, where Daniel has to step up and be responsible for his younger sister due to his parents rarely being around, especially since his father's company was scammed.

Second, the stories tried to depict the different impacts of CEN on victims as adults. In “Short of Perfect”, Amanda shows how she hides her emotions and lacks self-love. In the beginning of the story, Amanda rarely shows her mother how she feels. Every time Liana brings up her GPA, she seldom complains or expresses her discomfort about the topic, choosing to not say anything rather than anger her mother. She also lacks self-love, which can be seen at the start of the story. Although she is sick, she still attends class, stays back at campus to work on her assignment, and continues that assignment until past midnight. This shows that Amanda does not want to disobey Liana’s wishes for her to get a high GPA, even at the expense of her own happiness and health. Next, lack of self-discipline can be identified in Brian, the protagonist of “Stranded”. Due to his parents’ permissive parenting, he is free to do whatever he pleases, which leads to him making bad choices as he grows up, including skipping classes and paying someone to do his assignments. This happens because he has no way to control himself since his parents never set any rules. The fourth impact, low self-esteem, appears in the third story, “Not Their Job”. Christine thinks so lowly of herself because her parents never show her any kind of appreciation or validation, despite her outstanding achievements. Therefore, she thinks that no matter how much she tries, she will never be enough for them. The last effect, being overly responsible, can be seen in Daniel, the main character of “9-Year-Gap Dad”. Since he has been his sister’s primary caregiver for years, he gives himself the responsibility of fulfilling her every need. Daniel shows how overly responsible he is when he puts more effort into trying to attend Jess’ singing competition than doing his interview.

Finally, the collection also shows various methods of increasing self-care skills to overcome the effects of childhood emotional neglect. Amanda from “Short of Perfect” and Daniel from “9-Year-Gap Dad” apply the first method, which is to increase their sense of self-nurturance by putting themselves first. Amanda learns to say no to her mother’s demands in order to follow her own desires, which is to attend her crush’s birthday and have some fun, while Daniel learns to prioritize his future with the encouragement from his sister. The main character of “Stranded”, Brian, implements the second solution, which is to improve his sense of self-discipline. When his job and romantic relationship are at stake, he does this by reducing the amount of times he hangs out with his friends—by extension, cutting back on smoking. Since he is also given a project that will make or break his very-early career, he starts trying to be more disciplined by sticking with the deadlines, despite finding it challenging. Finally, Christine from “Not Their Job” uses the self-soothing method to cope. Her usual method of soothing herself is by taking a warm bath, but when her parents severely disappoint her by not attending her graduation, she develops a new method—venting through WhatsApp messages and deleting them after she calms down.

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