Author's response to reviews

Title: Child neglect in one-child family from Suzhou City of Mainland China

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear editors,
Many thanks for the comments provided by three reviewers. According to their suggestions, we have revised them point by point.

Comment 1
Major Compulsory Revisions:

1. The study needs stronger theoretical justification in the introduction. More information about neglect in China is warranted. Pan and Liu have used the SCNUC in China. How do their studies relate to the current investigation? Is there evidence within China that one-child and multiple-child families differ in their level of neglect? Would you expect the correlates of neglect found in other studies to be similar in this sample, or are there unique factors associated with neglect in one-child families? Why was Suzhou City chosen for the study? Is there something unique about this area that makes it well-suited for this study? The introduction really needs to be fleshed out more.
RESPONSE: We thank the reviewer for raising these important points in the introduction. We have added more information about neglect in China according to the Chinese language literature (few study of child neglect in English have been published), clarify all above questions in the section of introduction.

2. More explanation is needed for why cut-points were used for neglect instead of the continuous variables. I can see the reason for using “clinical” cut-points for describing the percentage of the sample that is neglected, but I think it would make more sense to use neglect as a continuous variable when predicting the factors that lead to neglect. Dichotomizing the distribution throws away important statistical information (e.g., a child that is grossly neglected is lumped with one who is only slightly neglected). The authors must provide a strong rationale for retaining dichotomized neglect variables in the main analyses, or they should strongly consider using the continuous neglect variables in regression models.
RESPONSE: We thank the reviewer for these suggestions. We have used the neglect as a continuous variable using a linear regression model.

3. I don’t think it’s fair to compare the prevalences of neglect as measured by the SCNUC with those reported by other studies that didn’t use the same instrument or criteria. Specifically, comparing single-child families in China with potentially multiple-child families in the United States is a stretch. There are dozens of factors that likely contribute to differences in rates and relative prevalence of neglect in these 2 samples, and whether the family has a single child or not may or may not be among them. This study does not have the data to isolate single-child families as a causal factor. The discussion should be rewritten to avoid speculation about this issue in the absence of data to indicate that parents of single children are less likely to neglect them than parents of multiple children.
RESPONSE: We compare the prevalence of neglect in Suzhou City with those conducted in other areas (with economic and demographic difference with Suzhou City) in China using the same instrument and
criteria (SCNUC and its national norm). We just compare the ordering of the rates of neglect subtypes with the findings from the western countries. The results were interpreted with caution and avoided discussion of considering the one child family as a causal factor.

Minor Essential Revisions:
1. Overall, the language could use some attention. There are issues with missing or extra articles and subject-verb agreement.

Response: Many thanks for the review’s suggestion. We have checked the whole paper and revised these mistakes.

2. The reliability statistics in the measures section are reported for the full SCNUC instrument (e.g., a total scale?). Because subscales are used in the study, reliability for the subscales should be reported on the sample used in the study, not on Pan’s sample.

Response: According to the review’s suggestion, we have conducted the study of the validity and reliability of SCNUC subscales we used in this sample. The results suggest that the SCNUC could be applied in our sample.

3. Why were categories of maternal age chosen to be <31 years, 31-41 years, and > 41 years? This division leaves very few mothers in the young and old age groups and I don’t see a theoretical reason for these categories. Please explain these groups, or choose another grouping that more evenly divides the subjects. All groupings like this should be explained.

Response: We have changed the maternal age from category variables into continuous variables.

4. There are only 2 Tables and no illustrations in the submitted version of the paper. The manuscript refers to Tables 2 and 3 in the results, which I believe should be Tables 1 and 2, respectively. The method refers to an illustration. Either include it or delete the reference to it in the text.

Response: We have revised these errors in the paper.

Discretionary Revisions:
1. Please be consistent in the number of decimal places used in the percentages in Table 1. Some are in whole numbers (14) are some have decimals (8.8)

Response: Thanks for the suggestion. We have revised these errors in the paper. We have been consistent in the number of decimal places used in percentages in Table2.

Comment 2
1. Is the question posed by the authors well defined?

No. The purpose just seems to be to estimate prevalence and examine a number of family and child factors
that correlate with neglect. There are no specific questions or hypotheses that derive from prior research or theory in this field.

RESPONSE: We thank the reviewer for raising these important points in the introduction. We have raised the specific questions from the previous research in Chinese language literature (few studies have been reported in English).

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described? (Major Compulsory Revisions)
The questionnaire is well described initially and the sampling method for reaching children is clear enough. However, there needs to be more detail about precisely how and where the parents completed the questionnaires. The response rate, even for China, is remarkably high. How could this have been achieved if parents took the questionnaires home? There must have been assiduous follow-up by the schools or researchers to ensure questionnaires were returned. One important matter must be clarified regarding the measures. See the 2nd page of the ‘measures’ section. The source(s) of the information on children and their parents is unclear. What information comes from the parents’ report and what information comes from other sources? Some of those variables are highly complex and difficult to measure. How was “impaired brain function” determined? How exactly was child/mother recent usage of hospitals measured? It is not sufficient to refer obliquely to “clinical records developed by local bureau of social security” (see page 8). The authors must provide specific information about how those data were gathered and how they could be linked to the questionnaires.

RESPONSE: Thanks for the suggestions. We have revised the process of investigation in more details. We conducted the investigation in parent-teacher meetings which were held twice a semester in general by class teachers in primary school of China in order to communicate the information about children’s academic performance with parents (or primary caregivers)(It is important for parents to understand the children’s performance at school). The response rate is usually high if we hand out the questionnaires in the meeting by the class teachers. Moreover, we have clarified the source of the variables, providing the specific information about the how the medical records gathered.(see the ‘measures’ section)

3. Are the data sound? (Major Compulsory Revisions)
There are three significant limitations. First, the basic trends in the data are not visible to the reader. There is some text in the first paragraph of the Results section, but that information should be tabulated and more detail added to illustrate exactly how the scores were distributed by item or neglect subtype. Second, the authors do not clarify precisely how their main dependent variables (5 types of neglect) were classified statistically. This vital information appears to be missing. Was a parent classified as neglectful if they endorsed just one item within a domain? A third, and very difficult analytical issue in this paper is that the authors simply compare percentages across the five domains, as if those percentages reflect the relative importance of the domain. However, this is not appropriate because there were different numbers of items in each domain (item numbers ranged from 2 to 16!). Endorsement of items in domains that are so different in size creates the obvious problem of under-estimation in the very small domain due to under-sampling of
the attributes of that type of neglect. Therefore, simple comparisons are likely to misrepresent the relative severity.

RESPONSE: (1) The distribution of scores of the neglect subscales have been tabulated (see table 1). (2) We have used the neglect scores as dependent variables) to make it more sense. (3) Because the domain of medical neglect only have two items, we have deleted the domain in the paper. The numbers of items for other four domains (physical, emotional, educational and supervisory neglect) are similar. We change the comparison of percentages to the comparison of scores.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition? I cannot comment on this question about data deposition in this journal

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data? (Major Compulsory Revisions)

No. The discussion does not delve any more deeply than re-stating what was reported in the data analysis. Too much attention is given to simple comparisons of the percentages in each domain. There is limited success in integrating the findings from this study with previous literature, especially Chinese literature. It over-states the influence of this paper to say (as they did several times) that this is the “first time” the issue of neglect has been looked at in one child families. The authors have not adequately considered prior research published in China from 2005-2012 (see below).

RESPONSE: We have integrated the findings of with Chinese literature, and the research published in China from 2005-2012 were considered. We have revised other questions raised by the review in the section of discussion.

6. Are limitations of the work clearly stated?

No. There are several important factors that should be addressed. One particular issue is whether parents’ self-report of their own neglectful behavior is likely to be affected by social desirability response bias.

RESPONSE: We have discussed that the self-report measures may cause the social desirability response bias, considering it as the limitation of our paper.

7. Do the authors clearly acknowledge any work upon which they are building, both published and unpublished? (Major Compulsory Revisions)

This is very weak in the manuscript. The authors suggest in the introduction (para 2) that “there is a scarcity of data on child neglect in China. That is not true. Indeed, the authors cite several times later in the paper two previous studies (Pan et al 2012; Lui et al, 2012) but they did not discuss what the authors have found. Also, the authors have not been comprehensive in searching Chinese language literature.

They missed papers such as: Hua, Wu, Gu et al (2006) An investigation of 370 cases of child neglect. Chinese J of Clinical Rehabilitation, 10, 172-175


of School Health, 31(3), 307-8
Zhang, Zheng & Zou (2006) Cross-sectional study on the influencing factors of neglect among children aged 3-6 in Guangzhou City. Chinese J of School Health, 27, 947-948. The authors should consider relevant findings from these and similar papers in both the introduction and discussion.
We have and recited these papers in the introduction of
RESPONSE: We have added more information about neglect in China according to the Chinese language literature, and having the Special acknowledgment to Pan for providing the measures of neglect subtypes in the section of acknowledgment.

8. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
Yes.

9. Is the writing acceptable?
In general it is acceptable, although the authors should seek editorial assistance form a native English speaker because at times the grammar is cumbersome
We have invited a native English speaker (Bright I. Nwaru) to revise the grammatical error.

Review 3

Abstract
Background: 1st sentence - I'm not sure what "social situations" means to refer to in the context of this first sentence. This is a little vague. 2nd sentence does not add much that is not mentioned in the third sentence. Maybe you could restate lack of research in the area in more general terms in China. 3rd sentence change aimed to aims. Methods: 1st sentence add “was conducted” to the end of the sentence. The age of the sample does not match the age of the sample in the introduction. The age band in this paper is 6-9. We have also revised it.

Results: Please use the term safeguard neglect throughout the document. Second sentence, please add -s to odds ratios. Please rewrite sentence: “younger mothers” Children who experience educational neglect were more likely to come from households with young or unemployed mothers. The following sentence Children of mother; replace “have safeguard neglect” with “who experienced safeguard neglect”. Next sentence starting Mothers and fathers…replace “children with” to “who experienced”. In the same sentence, "in addition" do you mean in addition to mothers and fathers that have a higher education? OR do you mean to use it as another way of saying "also." Conclusion: Please add “one child families” before in China in the second sentence.
RESPONSE: Thanks for these suggestions. We have revised them according to the review’s opinion. The age band in this paper is 6-9. We have also revised it.
Introduction
Please throughout the paper change supervision to safeguard neglect. Please be consistent in language you use caregiver, caretaker and parent. Please simplify the following sentence: Despite its negative effects and accordingly, warranting active research, there is a scarcity of data on child neglect in China. The sentence starting additionally…I suggest a new paragraph. Please change: “Did child neglect still…” to “Does child neglect…” “If the neglect was…” to “If neglect is…” and “what kind of factors was correlated to the neglect” to “what kind of factors are correlated with neglect”. Some comment as in abstract, please verify age group you are analysing. Furthermore remove in this study from the end of the sentence. Remove “The” (first word) from the last sentence in the introduction and remove –s on neglect.

RESPONSE: Thanks for these suggestions. We have revised the errors according to the review’s opinion.

Methods
Add ‘s to the following sentence: Only one school refused to participate in the study because the study period coincided with the school’s sports meetings. Please change “Therefore, a total of 2230 children’s caregivers in 4 primary schools were recruited into the study, which involved filling a self-administered questionnaire survey.” to “Therefore, a total of 2230 children’s caregivers in 4 primary schools were recruited, which involved filling out a self-administered questionnaire.” Remove, Class before teacher.
Reword “then put it in an envelope and then returned the sealed envelope to children’s teachers.” to “then placed it in a sealed envelope and returned it to the children’s teachers.” Following sentence remove “finally”. Do all the children in the final sample belong to the Han ethnic group or is there a number missing which is meant to indicate the number of children from this group? Also can you say something about this ethnic group? Is this the majority of the population in this region of China? Last sentence before “measure” please add “was” and was only accessible to researchers.

RESPONSE: We have revised them according to the review’s suggestion. The age band in this paper is 6-9. We have also revised it.

Measures
Please clarify the time frame you are using for child neglect last year prevalence or childhood prevalence. Please change “Physical neglect refers to caregivers not taking care of children’s basic needs…” to “child’s basic needs…” Please change “Educational neglect stands for the parental failure to give the educational opportunity…” to “Educational neglect the parental failure to provide educational opportunities…” Please change “Emotional neglect refers to the parental failure to give children an emotional environment that a” to “Emotional neglect refers to parental failure to provide children with an emotional environment that a…” Please change “Caregivers were asked to indicate how often they had conducted the listed neglectful behavior with a 4-point Likert scale (1=never, 2=occasional, 3=usual, 4=constant) in the past one year.” To
“Caregivers were asked to indicate how often they had conducted the listed neglectful behaviors with a 4-point Likert scale (1=never, 2=occasional, 3=usual, 4=constant) the past year.” Please consider replacing: “The scores of the subscales were sum of their corresponding items…” with “The scores of the subscales represented the sum of their corresponding items…” Please change: (the reversed items were reverse-scored) to “reversely scored” Please be consistent with language use safeguard neglect instead of safeguard neglect. In the same sentence please write educational neglect. Please add some information on child’s personality. It is mentioned in the results but not described among the measures. Please provide more information about the clinical records, validity etc. Who is providing this information? Can you please expand on why these age groupings were used for the mothers. In North America when we discuss young mothers we would probably consider younger than age 21 as young. Please add and change: “by local bureau of social security in order to monitor the children’s physical and mental health.” to “by local the bureau of social security in order to monitor the child’s physical and mental health.” Please change: “(whether or not the mother has physical or psychological illness in the past two years); parental education (whether or not the parents obtained the degree of higher education), family structure (family with three generation, nuclear family, single mother or father); and” to “(whether or not the mother had a physical or psychological illness in the past two years); parental education (whether or not the parents obtained a degree of higher education), family structure (families with three generations, nuclear family, single mother or father); and” Please change: “‘Family with three generation’ refers to the child living with his/her biological parents and grandparents, and it was usual among Chinese families due to the traditional family culture.” to “Families with three generation” refers to the child living with his/her biological parents and grandparents, and was common among Chinese families due to the traditional family culture.” Furthermore is it still common? Should was be replaced with is? The income variable is unusual; often it’s analyzed as below or above a poverty line. Please expand on why this choice was made.

RESPONSE: We have revised them according to the review’s suggestion. Moreover, the children’s personality has not been included in the final analysis and we have revised the error and deleted it in the results. We have provided more information about clinical records and test the validity of the subscales for neglect subtypes. Additionally, Suzhou city is one of the most developed areas in south-eastern China. The majority of its population is above the national ‘poverty line’ (99.6% of the subjects’ families were above the poverty line in this sample). It is difficult to analyze the income as category variable when using the ‘poverty line’ as cut-off. We used the average per-capita disposable income (yuan) as continuous variable to explore the relationship between the income and neglect in revised paper. We also use the maternal age as continuous variable in the linear regression model in the paper.

**Statistical analysis**

Remove the, write: Binominal logistic….  

RESPONSE: We use the linear regression model in the revised paper.
Results

Remove “the” and change to supervisory: “Of 2044 children, 20% have experienced the supervision”. Please be consistent when listing subtypes of neglect in a sentence. (physical neglect, emotional neglect OR physical and emotional neglect). Regarding consistency: at times through this document the prevalence estimate is after the word neglect and sometimes before (i.e. physical neglect (4%) or physical (4%) neglect. Please change: “in one child family of Suzhou. Table 2 shows the distribution of prevalence of subtypes of neglects by the child’s and family characteristics.” To “in one child families of Suzhou. Table 2 shows the distribution of the prevalence of subtypes of neglect by child and family characteristics.” Please change: “After simultaneous adjustment for the child’s and family” to “After simultaneous adjustment for child and family” Please change: “have children with educational neglect. Mother’s health…” to “have children who experienced educational neglect. Mother’s health…” Please add: mothers with a college education. Please add neglect to the end of the sentence: educational (OR 0.49; 95% CI 0.28 to 0.87), and medical (OR 0.44; 95% CI 0.28 to 0.71) neglect. Please refer to Tables 1 and 2 in the results and not to Tables 2 and 3. Please add sample size to both tables. Please add if the proportions are significantly different in Table 1. Please add percentages to the total column I Table 1. Table 1 title add –s to subtypes.

RESPONSE: We thank the reviewer for raising these important points. We have revised the errors according to reviewer’s suggestion. We have added statistical analysis in Table1 and Table2.

Discussion

Paragraph1-2: Please change: “child neglect in one-child family, including…” to “child neglect in one-child families, including” Please change: “we used the measurement which has been developed and validated in Chinese population to assess the child neglect in one-child family in the study.” to “we used a measurement which has been developed and validated in the Chinese population to assess child neglect in one-child families.” Please reword: “The results showed that it is safeguard neglect was the most prevalent type of neglect (20%), followed by emotional (15%), physical (11%) neglect, medical (7.7%) neglect, and the educational neglect (6.0%) were the least common. Sedlak & Broadhurst [2] have reported the education neglect in U.S. children were the most frequent subtype (0.6%), followed by physical (0.5%) and emotional (0.3%) neglects.” to “The results show that safeguard neglect was the most prevalent type (20%), followed by emotional (15%), physical (11%), medical (7.7%), and educational neglect (6.0%). Sedlak & Broadhurst [2] have reported educational neglect in U.S. children as the most frequent subtype (0.6%), followed by physical (0.5%) and emotional (0.3%) neglect.”

I was also curious whether you could find a better source of comparison, considering that the Chinese source is parental report meanwhile the NIS using a proxy informant. Professional reporting tends to underreport children’s experiences of maltreatment. Please reword: ‘The ordering of the prevalence or proportion of neglect subtypes was seemingly different between the one-child family in Mainland China and families which may have more than one child in U.S. where the one-child family policy has never been implemented in the country. This result might imply that parents from one-child family consider the child as their “only hope”, thereby
putting greater efforts to make them culturally desirable or physically fit, but neglecting their children’s emotional needs. However, it seemed difficult to compare the neglect prevalence of this study with that in other studies due to the different measurements we used.” to “The ordering of the prevalence or proportion of neglect subtypes were seemingly different between the one-child families in Mainland China and families which may have more than one child in United States. This result might imply that parents from one-child families consider the child as their “only hope”, thereby putting greater efforts to make them culturally desirable or physically fit, but neglecting their children’s emotional needs. However, it is difficult to compare the neglect prevalence in this study with that in other studies due to the different measurements we used.”

**Paragraph 3:** Please clarify, is the Israeli data applicable to neglect or maltreatment? Please add –s to results. The results of the present study showed that boys were less likely to experience physical neglect than girls. This finding is also interesting because, as far as I know, boys are more likely to experience harsh physical neglect than girls in Western countries such as the US. It might be worth while to make this comparison.

**Paragraph 4:** Please remove other: This result is in concordance with other previous reports that parental perception of the child as a problem was an important risk factor for child neglect [19]. Please change: “Another study reveals that 68% of children with body dysmorphic disorder were emotional neglected [20]. Interestingly, child’s cognitive impairment may suffer from emotional neglect in present study. It is consistent with the previous report indicating that children with physical and cognitive disabilities were 3.4 times more likely to be maltreated than their nondisabled peers [21].” to “Another study reveals that 68% of children with body dysmorphic disorder were emotionally neglected [20]. Interestingly, this study suggests that child’s cognitive impairment may suffer from emotional neglect. This is consistent with the previous reports indicating that children with physical and cognitive disabilities were 3.4 times more likely to be maltreated than their nondisabled peers [21].

**Paragraph 5:** Please reword: “Our results also indicate that children of younger mother were at a higher risk of experiencing educational neglect. Although we did not find other studies supporting this finding, this may be related to the level of experience and maturity of younger mothers, making them fail in giving adequate education to their child. This would need to be investigated further. Maternal health problem was protective from childhood safeguard neglect in the study. In contrast, it had been reported in previous studies that mothers with mental health problems were at risk of maltreating their children [21]. Furthermore, maternal education was associated with almost all neglect subtypes, which corroborate previous findings [22] that neglectful mothers…” to “Our results also indicate that children of younger mothers were at higher risk of experiencing educational neglect. Although we did not find other studies supporting this finding, this may be related to the level of experience and maturity of younger mothers, resulting in the failure to provide adequate education for their child. This finding warrants further investigation. Maternal health problems were protective from childhood safeguard neglect in this study. In contrast, previous studies have reported that mothers with mental health problems were at risk of
maltreating their children [21]. The findings, regarding the maternal age needs to be addressed further considering the wide confidence interval. These findings need to be interpreted with caution. Please add low: “Furthermore, maternal low education was associated with almost all neglect subtypes, which corroborate previous findings [22] that neglectful mothers…” It may be useful to put all findings regarding the mother’s level of education together. Please clarify what is meant by father’s feature. Please change position of low in the sentence: Finally, low family income was associated with medical neglect. This is in contrast to other studies [10, 23], in which poverty was not associated with physical neglect. I don’t know that this comparison above works as you seem to be comparing low family income and medical neglect in your study with low family income and physical neglect in other studies. Please change the comparison to be more appropriate. Please change: However, the family structure was not associated with child neglect in one-child families in this study. The following sentence is unclear, please clarify. The only child in their families is precious and the difference among different family structures may be narrowed.

RESPONSE: We compare the prevalence of neglect in Suzhou City with those conducted in other areas (with economic and demographic difference with Suzhou City) in China using the same instrument and criteria (SCNUC and its national norm). We just compare the ordering of the rates of neglect subtypes with the findings from the western countries. The results were interpreted with caution and avoided discussion of considering the one child family as a causal factor. We have clarified the Israeli data’s application. The maternal age has been used in continuous variable with the comparative narrow confidence interval in the revised paper. Because the medical neglect assessed by only two items in SCNUC, it may create the under-estimated, we deleted this domain in the revised paper.

Conclusion
Please correct: “In conclusion, the child supervision and emotional neglect was the most common, while the education neglect was the least among these neglect subtypes in the one-child family of China which deserve greater attention. In support of previous reports, child’s gender,” to “In conclusion, child supervisory and emotional neglect were the most common, while educational neglect was the least common among these neglect subtypes in one-child families in China. This deserves greater attention. In support of previous reports, a child’s gender,” Please reword: “…in one-child family, by taken into account the observed family socio-demographic characteristics as potential predictors of child neglect. Further studies are also required to investigate whether intervention programs that target at improving these elements would improve the childhood neglect and its subtype. Moreover, in present study, the majority of children (above 99.9%) were the “only child” in their family under the rigorous birth control policy in urban area of Mainland China. Therefore, it is impossible to make the comparison between the one-child family and families with more than one child. It seemed also difficult to compare the neglect prevalence with that of other studies when different measures for neglect were used.” To “…in one-child families, by taking into account the observed family socio-demographic characteristics as potential predictors of child neglect. Further studies are also required to investigate whether intervention programs that target improving these
elements would improve the childhood neglect and its subtypes. Moreover, in the present study, the majority of children (above 99.9%) were the “only child” in their family under the rigorous birth control policy in urban area of Mainland China. Therefore, it is impossible to make the comparison between the one-child families and families with more than one child. It is also difficult to compare the neglect prevalence with that of other studies given that different measures for neglect were used.” I think more limitation of this study needs to being highlighted, for instance, unwillingness to disclose neglectful behavior on the part of the parents.

RESPONSE: We have discussed that the self-report measures may cause the social desirability response bias, considering it as the limitation of our paper.

References

Please add –s to References. Please update reference list to more recent research, many sources are more than 20 years old. For instance, Howard Dubowitz work is missing.

We have added the more recent paper in the revised paper.