



## Culture and context in understanding child maltreatment: Contributions of intersectionality and neighborhood-based research



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### ABSTRACT

In the early 1990s, the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect commissioned a series of reviews that appeared as the edited volume, *Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect* (Melton & Barry, 1994). Using the 1994 review “*Sociocultural Factors in Child Maltreatment*” (Korbin, 1994) as a background, this article reconsiders culture and context in child maltreatment work. Since 1994, conditions promoting research and practice attention in this area include immigration-driven global increases in diverse, multicultural societies where different beliefs and practices meet (and clash); expanding purview of the human rights discourse to children; and the disproportionate and disparate representation of cultural, ethnic, and racial groups in child-welfare systems. Although research on child maltreatment has advanced in many ways over 20 years, the complexity of child maltreatment leaves many critical questions demanding further attention, culture and context among them. To help address these questions, we propose two approaches for future maltreatment research: intersectionality – the simultaneous examination of multiple identities (such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status) – as a framework for understanding the complexity of cultural factors; and neighborhood-based research as a means for understanding the context of child maltreatment from the perspective of an ecological framework.

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### Introduction

In the early 1990s, the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect commissioned a series of reviews that appeared as the edited volume, *Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect* (Melton & Barry, 1994). As part of a 20 year retrospective, this article revisits the 1994 review “*Sociocultural Factors in Child Maltreatment*” (Korbin, 1994) as a background for reconsidering culture and context in child maltreatment. Although research on child maltreatment has advanced in many ways over 20 years, the complexity of child maltreatment leaves many critical questions demanding further attention, culture and context among them. In this article, we briefly summarize the 1994 paper and consider work in the intervening years on culture and context in child maltreatment. We also consider *intersectionality* as a framework for understanding the complexity of

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cultural factors and *neighborhood-based research* as a means for understanding the context of child maltreatment from an ecological framework.

The focus of the 1994 chapter “Sociocultural Factors in Child Maltreatment” was the relationship of culture and child maltreatment. In that chapter, Korbin emphasized culturally informed and competent definitions that centered on distinguishing among three definitional levels: (a) cultural differences, (b) violation of cultural norms, and (c) societal-level maltreatment. Korbin also pointed out that cultural differences have sometimes been difficult to determine because use of broad “racial” or geographic-origin categories mask heterogeneity among populations (for example, grouping Mexicans, Guatemalans, and Brazilians under the label of Hispanic/Latino; grouping Chinese, Thai, Japanese, and Hawaiians under the label of Asian/Pacific Islander). Fontes (2005) has since termed this practice *ethnic lumping*. Korbin’s recommendations urged culturally informed and culturally competent approaches and flexibility in considering the role of culture, specifically the need to “unpack” culture by identifying the specific cultural factors that increase or decrease the risk for maltreatment. She also urged attention to both across and within-cultural variability. Neighborhood-based approaches also were identified in the 1994 chapter as a promising approach in child maltreatment work both to better understand the etiology of child maltreatment and to deliver services at a more local level.

## Culture and Child Maltreatment

Initial efforts to understand culture and child maltreatment emphasized cultural variability in what was defined as child maltreatment as well as aspects of the cultural setting and culturally based child care practices and beliefs that would explain why child abuse was more or less likely to occur in different cultures (e.g., Korbin, 1981). A positive outcome of this approach was to promote a more pluralistic perspective, avoiding ethnocentrism with a goal of developing culturally informed or culturally competent prevention and intervention programs (e.g., Fontes, 2005; Korbin & Spilsbury, 1999).

Since the 1994 review, three basic and interrelated trends have contributed to continued interest in the relationship of culture and child maltreatment. First, rapidly and dramatically changing demographic trends have brought populations with differing cultural traditions and practices into contact with one another. Changing global demographics and the resulting contact among diverse populations has drawn attention to cultural conflict in many domains, including issues of child maltreatment. The world has become more diverse, with waves of immigration changing the cultural and ethnic texture of major regions of the world. The number of international migrants increased from 154 million in 1990 to a record high of 232 million in 2013 (International Migration Report, 2013). Approximately 15 per cent of international migrants (35 million) are under 20 years of age (Trends in International Migrant Stock, 2013). Dynamic, diverse, and complex multicultural societies have become a reality around the world, bringing with them potential for cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. It has become critical for child protection work to develop strategies for addressing these conflicts in the best interests of children.

Second, human rights attention has been directed toward children. International conventions, notably the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), have sought to establish universal criteria for child well-being and protection to which all nations and cultures are expected to adhere. However, the assumption of a universal childhood does not necessarily reflect the wide array of cultures and circumstances in which children live, rendering the establishment of such criteria challenging. Creation of standards to promote well-being and freedom from maltreatment applicable to all children requires a firm understanding of culture and context.

Third, disproportionate and disparate representation of cultural, ethnic, and racial groupings in child welfare, primarily in Western, industrialized nations, has stimulated concerns about how best to serve diverse populations in child welfare systems. We will return to this theme in more depth later in this article.

The literature on child maltreatment has seen increased attention to group differences subsumed under the terms culture, ethnicity and race. Miller and Cross (2006) analyzed articles published between 1995 and 2002 in three of the field’s leading journals (*Child Abuse & Neglect*, *Child Maltreatment*, and *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*). The percentage of articles reporting ethnic composition of the sample increased from 50% between 1995 and 1998 to 59% between 1999 and 2002, and articles using ethnicity in analyses increased from 15% between 1995 and 1998 to 24% between 1999 and 2002. In addition, a growing international literature points to child maltreatment as a global phenomenon, occurring across a wide range of cultures. For example, the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) publishes *World Perspectives*, to coincide with its biannual meetings and to summarize approaches to child maltreatment across a wide range of countries.

The literature on child maltreatment also has sought to identify differences in incidence and prevalence across international and cultural boundaries. A meta-analysis combining prevalence figures of childhood sexual abuse reported in 217 publications found that the lowest rates for both girls (113/1,000) and boys (41/1,000) were in Asia, and highest rates for girls were in Australia (215/1,000) and for boys in Africa (193/1,000) (Stoltenborgh, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). Other studies have compared child maltreatment rates between countries, suggesting that differences may be explained by cultural factors (e.g., Finkelhor, Ji, Mikton, & Dunne, 2013; Sebre et al., 2004). Differences regarding the prevalence of child maltreatment between ethnic, cultural, or racial groups within predominantly Eurocentric countries have been the focus of numerous studies (e.g., Amodio, Griffin, Fassler, Clay, & Ellis, 2006; Fanslow, Robinson, Crengle, & Perese, 2007; Hawkins et al., 2010; Warner, Alegria, & Canino, 2012). In the United States, for example, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health estimated the prevalence of self-reported child maltreatment and examined its relationship to sociodemographic factors, including racial/ethnic group membership. The findings yielded significant relationships between selected racial/ethnic groups and each type of maltreatment. However, most of these associations were weakened when

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