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# Child Abuse & Neglect

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## The effects of individual- and national-level factors on attitudes toward child maltreatment<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Knowledge is lacking regarding the extent to which national norms and policies designed to protect minors influence individual attitudes toward child maltreatment. Relying on the tenets of cultural sociology, we examine whether the orientation of a nation influences individual attitudes toward child maltreatment. Specifically, nations with greater economic and political stability tolerate more self-expressive values, focusing on individual autonomy and enhancing quality of life. Conversely, nations with a survivalist orientation, often characterized by greater economic uncertainty, are less supportive of behaviors that may result in further instability. The current study builds on extant research by investigating the effects of national norms and policies and individual-level attitudes and characteristics on individual attitudes toward child maltreatment ( $N = 66,391$ ) in 53 developing and developed nations. We analyze data from the World Values Survey using Hierarchical Generalized Linear Modeling. Overall, countries with a greater survivalist orientation appear less tolerant of child maltreatment. Moreover, greater support for violence in general at both the national- and individual-level are associated with more supportive attitudes toward child maltreatment. Policy implications and legislative reform are discussed.

### 1. Introduction

Child maltreatment affects millions of young people across all nations and within all cultures. Child maltreatment is commonly conceptualized as including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect, but can also include misuse of punishment (Smith, Robinson, & Segal, 2018). Recent estimates indicate that a quarter of all adults worldwide report experiencing physical victimization as children (World Health Organization [WHO], 2016), and it is estimated that between 500 million and 1.5 billion children experience some form of violent victimization annually (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2008). The scope of non-physical forms of child maltreatment is difficult to estimate, as emotional and psychological abuse against children has received less global attention compared to physical and sexual abuse (World Health Organization [WHO], 2002). As elaborated below, even though the World Values Surveys relies on the phrasing “parents beat children” to allow for cross-national translations, the phrase “child maltreatment” is used throughout to highlight the possible broad range of behaviors. Although child maltreatment is a ubiquitous phenomenon, there is little research examining cross-national variations in attitudes toward child maltreatment; this is problematic, as understating attitudes is arguably the first step in forming the foundation for the legal and social

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responses to this problem (Gracia & Herrero, 2008).

Cultural sociology suggests that economic development and political stability shape attitudes regarding social values, including traditional vs. secular-rational values and survival vs. self-expressive values (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Inglehart, 2006; Inglehart, Norris, & Welzel, 2002). Nations with greater economic and political stability typically tolerate more self-expressive values—those focusing on an individual's autonomy and enhancing the quality of life. Conversely, nations with a survivalist orientation, often characterized by greater economic uncertainty, are less supportive of behaviors that may result in further instability. Research suggests that global attitudes vary considerably. "Nation" is a vague concept and scholars—including historians, political scientists, criminologists, and sociologists—have made considerable efforts to identify and define its form (see Tajfel, 2009). Additionally, research has attempted to assess cross-boundary differences and similarities as they relate to a multitude of issues, including violence against women, homosexuality, and suicide (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Boyd & Chung, 2012; Hayes & Boyd, 2017; Nayak, Byrne, Martin, & Abraham, 2003). Important to the current study, sociological research—dating back to the work of Marx and Durkheim—has examined how cultural tenets shape individual actions, known as the macro-micro link (Adamczyk & Hayes, 2012; Blau, 2002; Coleman, 1986; Collins, 1981; Ritzer, 1990). Relying on the work of Durkheim (1897/1951; 1912/1995), we examine how macro forces shape individual attitudes and if this macro-level effect remains even when controlling for individual-level characteristics. We explore this macro effect in two ways. The first is an examination of Durkheim's *sui generis* proposition, which proposes that the attitudes of a group have an effect beyond individual attitudes and may represent something fundamentally distinct from individual-level attitudes. The second examines whether legislative changes have an influence on individual-level attitudes in areas where cultural norms are generally supportive of legal reform.

Significant variation exists across nations in terms of child protection laws. Overall, little is known about the extent to which national norms and policies designed to protect minors influence individual attitudes toward child maltreatment. Extant research conducted in European Union member nations has found that both the number of deaths attributable to child maltreatment and civil laws banning child maltreatment were associated with attitudes toward the physical punishment of children (Gracia & Herrero, 2008). Because public opinion influences the formation of many public policies (Roberts, 2000), we review factors that influence attitudes toward child maltreatment within both developing and developed nations.

Using data from the World Values Survey, we examine the macro-micro link to understand cross-national variation in attitudes toward child maltreatment. Relying on data from 66,391 respondents nested within 53 countries, we explore if macro-level influences (e.g., national value orientation) or micro-level processes (e.g., individual values placed on religion) influence attitudes toward child maltreatment. More specifically, we examine if macro cultural effects influence attitudes in ways that are fundamentally distinct from individual-level attitudes.

## 2. Extant research on child maltreatment and attitudes toward child maltreatment

Contradictions between the heavy use of child labor during industrialization and the enlightenment-era notion of childhood as a distinct, romanticized, and autonomous experience lead to shifts in how societies and nations view children. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, industrialization and changes in social and philosophical attitudes toward children resulted in the development of laws, policies, and institutions specifically aimed to protect children (Bain, 2000; Locke, 1959). Indeed, the first child labor legislation aimed at enhancing the education of child factory workers (Moehling, 1999). Following stricter labor laws, norms within industrial nations began to dictate that resources be invested in children for their development, safety, and overall well-being, rather than viewing children solely as workers to help support the family. Structural, technological, and economical changes, along with the success of industrial capitalism are often credited for removing children from the labor pool (Zelizer, 1985). Increasing needs for an educated workforce following these changes, in addition to rising family incomes, resulted in families sending their children back to school (Zelizer, 1985). In the end, as the economic value of children steadily decreased the emotional and supposedly inherent value of children increased (Zelizer, 1985). This shift arguably began to improve the quality of life for children.

Data on child maltreatment can be captured retrospectively, via official sources, or in real time from the child or caregiver. Each of these data collection strategies has a unique set of challenges. It is unlikely that official sources are representative of all cases—even in nations with mandatory reporting laws—because not every crime is reported or substantiated. In addition, it is difficult to conduct research with caregivers because once the caregiver indicates s/he engaged in abusive behavior, the researcher may be obligated (either through legal mandates or moral compulsion) to report the behavior (cf. Negash & Maguire-Jack, 2016).

Despite these limitations, scholars assert that parental attitudes toward child maltreatment likely predict behavior, with more supportive attitudes being linked to abusive and neglectful behavior (Jackson et al., 1999; Vittrup, Holden, & Buck, 2006). Moreover, research indicates that attitudes toward child maltreatment are stable over time (Vittrup et al., 2006). Similarly, more supportive attitudes toward corporal punishment have been found to be associated with perceptions of seriousness of maltreatment as well as reporting behaviors (Ashton, 2001). The widespread use of corporal punishment may be problematic, as this practice has been identified as a risk factor for poor child outcomes, including physical abuse directed at the child (Gershoff, 2002; Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010; Whipple & Richly, 1997). Moreover, most substantiated physical child abuse cases arise from the misuse of corporal punishment (Troemé & Durrant, 2003). Prior research on corporal punishment and attitudes toward its use can inform our understanding regarding attitudes toward child maltreatment. This is because data regarding factors and consequences for child maltreatment are difficult to collect, especially due to mandatory reporting laws for child abuse. In the end, attitudes about how children should be treated are influenced by both the social and cultural context in which an individual resides (Peisner, 1989; Straus, 1994). Examining national-level factors that influence these attitudes may help identify country-specific avenues for policies geared toward reducing child maltreatment.

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