



Perception and determination of child maltreatment: Exploratory comparisons across three countries



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Little is known about perception and determination of child maltreatment across countries. Although differences in perception and determination of maltreatment across regions of a single country are well documented, comparative knowledge across countries remains sparse. This internet survey examined perception of abusive behaviors and factors considered important in determining maltreatment in three countries (i.e., the United States, Ghana, and Nigeria).

Method: Forty-five abusive behaviors comprising physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, child neglect, and child labor, as well as 13 factors considered important in determining maltreatment, were examined among a convenience sample of 327 respondents in the United States, Ghana, and Nigeria. Respondents were recruited within and outside universities in the three countries and links to the survey were sent to respondents who are nonstudents.

Results: With all the countries combined, consensus was high for 15 of the 45 abusive behaviors, although levels of consensus and perceptions varied by country and race. Consensus was high for all of the abusive behaviors among respondents in the United States, 36 of the abusive behaviors among respondents in Ghana, and none of the abusive behaviors among respondents in Nigeria. Respondents who are White/Caucasian were significantly more likely to perceive 5 of the behaviors as abuse than respondents who are Black/non-Caucasian. Similarly, factors considered important in determining maltreatment differed by country and race. Respondents in the United States and Ghana were more likely to consider 9 of the 13 factors important in determining maltreatment compared to respondents in Nigeria. Also, Caucasians/Whites were more likely to consider 6 of the 13 factors important in determining maltreatment compared to Blacks/non-Caucasians.

Conclusion: Despite racial and regional differences, there are indications that cross-cultural consensus on perception and determination of abusive behaviors is possible. Understanding differences in socio-cultural experiences may help bridge the current gaps in cross-cultural consensus on perception and determination of abusive behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Decades ago, child maltreatment experts suggested that cross-cultural perspectives should be considered when examining abusive behaviors against children (Kempe, 1982; Korbin, 1981). Almost two decades later, the United Nations called for a global study on violence against children around the world. Although considerable progress has been made in child maltreatment research and instruments have been developed to measure incidence and prevalence of maltreatment (Runyan, Dunne, & Zolotor, 2009), current knowledge about perception of maltreatment has been informed by data generated primarily from individual regions around the world. Knowledge derived from cross-cultural comparisons of societies is sparse. Because empirical evidence about

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maltreatment is limited to cultural experiences of the society in which the data were generated, the absence of cross-cultural knowledge about maltreatment hampers necessary insight for addressing controversies surrounding maltreatment, as well as for guiding child protection policies across regions.

To obtain knowledge about maltreatment globally, consideration must be given to cultural differences to account for the diverse cultural contexts in which children may experience vulnerability (Agathonos-Georgopoulou, 1992). Behavior that may be regarded as abusive in one country may be regarded as acceptable in another country (Baumrind, 1994; Reisig & Miller, 2009) and variation in perceptions of physical abuse, child neglect, emotional/psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and child labor across countries must be reasonably anticipated. As a result, empirical knowledge about cross-cultural differences in perception of maltreatment is vital for accommodating increasing globalization of child protection. Studies about perception of maltreatment must “move beyond nationalistic perspectives to permit the development of an international definition of which parental behaviors constitute child abuse and impact the child’s development” (Segal & Iwai, 2004, p. 26).

Given the relevance of cross-cultural knowledge to global child protection, the purpose of this study was to compare perceptions and factors considered important in determining abusive behaviors in three countries to generate some preliminary evidence of cross-cultural similarities and differences and some exploratory knowledge that may enhance policy and practice decisions across international boundaries. Methodologically, the study builds on previous studies (e.g., Portwood, 1998, 1999; Smith, 2006, 2010) by comparing ratings of abusive behaviors and factors considered in determining maltreatment across countries.

2. Rationale/justification for the study

The rationale for this study is informed by the realization that current knowledge about perception of abuse is derived from nationalistic perspectives (Segal & Iwai, 2004). Despite the acknowledgment that some behaviors are universally deemed to be abusive (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993), little is known about the nature of behaviors and level of consensus about such behaviors cross-culturally, especially between developed and developing countries. This lack of knowledge is perhaps exacerbated by the realization that research on maltreatment at the governmental level or by international organizations have focused primarily on prevalence data without knowledge of underlying perception of maltreatment that informed the prevalence data. Thus, a cross-cultural examination of perception of abusive behaviors and factors considered important in determining maltreatment will complement current global research efforts on child protection and provide opportunities for international transfer of knowledge that may enhance prevention, protection, intervention, and services to children.

The rationale for examining cross-cultural perception of abusive behaviors is further strengthened by the fact that comparative knowledge regarding cross-cultural instruments for measuring perception of maltreatment is sparse. For example, cross-cultural measurement of child abuse and retrospective self-report of childhood abuse were recently developed (Dunne et al., 2009; Runyan et al., 2009; Zolotor et al., 2009) but there is no instrument for measuring perception of abuse across cultures. Knowledge generated from cross-cultural comparisons of perception of abuse may provide empirical resources for the development of instruments to measure cross-cultural perception of abuse. Such knowledge may also enhance cross-cultural practice in child protection or influence global child protection laws and policies that reflect the perception of abuse across national boundaries. In addition, because perception is related to perpetration of maltreatment (Rodriguez & Price, 2004), examining perception can provide valuable information for understanding propensity for perpetration of maltreatment across national boundaries.

Undoubtedly, current gaps in cross-cultural knowledge about perception of abuse have implications for understanding inconsistent progress in global protection of children. Global child protection policies that are not informed by local population’s knowledge of perception of abuse may encourage lackluster commitment to child protection policies and stymie the political will for their implementation. Cross-cultural knowledge in essence has a potential for informing policy formulation and strategic implementation of child protection laws locally and internationally. In summary, the rationale for the study were to (a) determine the level of cross-cultural consensus of behaviors considered to be abusive to children, (b) determine similarities and differences in perception (i.e., the level of consensus) of abusive behaviors between countries, (c) examine cross-cultural concordance and discordance in determination of maltreatment, and (d) provide a preliminary basis upon which knowledge about perception of abusive behaviors and determination of maltreatment may be transferred nationally and internationally. The three countries (i.e., the United States, Ghana, and Nigeria) were chosen for exploratory examination because of their developmental classification differences (developed – US vs. developing – Ghana and Nigeria – countries) as well as socio-cultural similarities (between Ghana and Nigeria) and differences (between all the three countries).

3. Perception of child maltreatment and rights of the child

Undoubtedly, efforts to protect vulnerable children have increased over the last two decades, particularly through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stipulates in 54 articles how children ought to be treated globally. Each article addresses different areas of vulnerability and protections needed to guarantee the safety of children. For example, Article 19 describes protection from all forms of violence against children including physical, psychological, and sexual abuse; Article 32 describes child labor; and Article 34 describes sexual exploitation of children (UNESCO, 1989). However, framed from a legal perspective, the Rights of the Child do little to address differences in social contexts in which children exist but leaves to the volition of each country to integrate the guidelines into their existing child protection laws and policies. By recognizing differences in perception of maltreatment across countries, efforts to define in specific terms some abusive behaviors remain challenging. Although it is universally acceptable that children should not be maltreated, “the problem centers on actually defining what parenting practices and social norms specifically constitute mistreatment” (Reisig & Miller, 2009, p. 26). While the consensus on sexual exploitation (Article 34) appears to be high, some areas of differences in perception exist across regions, particularly regarding what constitutes child labor (Article 32) or physical and psychological abuse (Article 19).

An example of differences in perception and beliefs relates to physical abuse or the use of corporal punishment. Differences within country have been reported across cultures including among Spanish families (Gracia & Herrero, 2008), Jewish and Israeli-Arab parents (Benbenishty & Schmid, 2013; Guttmann, Lazar, & Makhoul, 2009; Schmid & Benbenishty, 2011; Sulimani-Aidan & Benbenishty, 2013), and respondents in Hong Kong (Chan, Chun, & Chung, 2008). In some countries, some degree of differences in definition, perception, and reporting of abusive behaviors were reported. Such differences are often the source of tension and confusion in multicultural societies where official definitions of maltreatment often run counter to culturally acceptable practices of child rearing (Raman & Hodes, 2012).

4. Prevalence and definition of maltreatment in the United States, Ghana, and Nigeria

In any society, perception of maltreatment prevalence rates varies across regions of a single country. Based on incidence in the United

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