



Are parents reliable in reporting child victimization? Comparison of parental and adolescent reports in a matched Chinese household sample[☆]

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ABSTRACT

There is ongoing debate about the reliability of parental reports on child victimization. Some studies have shown that they are useful, whereas some others have provided contrary evidence suggesting that parents are not accurate in reporting child victimization, especially when they are the one who inflicted the violence. This study aimed to (a) examine the reliability of parental reports of adolescents' experiences of victimization, including that inflicted by parents as well as others, by comparing them with self-reports using a parent–child matched sample from China; and (b) explore the possible reasons underlying any disagreement between the parental and adolescent reports. A total of 2,624 parent–adolescent pairs were recruited during 2009 and 2010 in 6 cities in China. Parents were asked to report the victimization experiences of their child using of the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire, and these reports were matched with the adolescents' self-reports of victimization. Low levels of parent–adolescent agreement in reporting were found (Cohen's kappa = .04–.29). Except for sexual violence, parents were significantly less likely to report all types of victimization. Overall, lower levels of agreement were found in the reporting of (a) less severe types of victimization, (b) victimization outside the family, and (c) victimization involving parents as perpetrators. Intimate partner violence between parents was significantly associated with discrepancies between reports. The findings suggest that parents might not be reliable as a single source of information on certain types of adolescent victimization.

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Introduction

Child victimization is a broad concept that includes being a victim of conventional crime, child abuse and neglect within the family, peer and sibling victimization, sexual victimization by known or unknown individuals, and exposure to victimization within and outside the family (Finkelhor, Hamby, Ormrod, & Turner, 2005). Whether parents are reliable to serve as the single source of information of child victimization has long been debated. Some researchers have suggested that parental reports of child victimization can be a reliable source of information. For example, Kerker, Horwitz, Leventhal, Plichta, and Leaf (2000) studied 1,148 mothers of children 4–8 years of age in a clinical setting and showed that reports of the mothers detected more child victimization cases than those of the pediatricians. Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, and Runyan (1998),

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in their validation study of the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale (CTSPC), demonstrated that parental reports compared well to those made by children under the age of 18 years in identifying child abuse and neglect.

Other researchers have been doubtful about the accuracy of parental reports. They assert that existing evidence for the usefulness of parental reports is not strong enough to support their use as a single source of information and that parental reports may be prone to response bias. Child victimization, in particular child abuse and neglect, may involve parents; and it may be possible that the parent informant may also be the one who inflicts violence against the child. In such situations, it is not unlikely for these parents to underreport or refuse to disclose the victimization incidents as a result of shame, denial, or fear of future legal consequences (Appel & Holden, 1998).

It is noteworthy that, in the midst of the ongoing discussion on the accuracy of parental reports, a recurring conclusion has been put forward that there has not yet been a generally accepted, scientifically validated procedure for absolutely reliable identification of child victimization cases (Goodman, Emery, & Haugaard, 1998; Guyer, 1995). Nonetheless, this does not mean that one could not assess the relative accuracy of reports. Instead, a number of researchers have tried to do so by conducting studies to compare parental reports and child reports using matched samples. Overall, a low-to-moderate degree of agreement has been identified (e.g., Jouriles & Norwood, 1995; Kolko, Kazdin, & Day, 1996). A recent study with a sample of 1,093 parent-child matched pairs has replicated this finding (Chan, 2012). The level of agreement among reports of severe physical victimization was found to be even lower, suggesting that parents may be inaccurate as the single source of information in detecting or reporting the victimization of their children.

The discrepancy between parental and child reports of child victimization may be even greater when the parent informant is the one who is inflicting the violence. Parental self-reports are potentially biased in that the informant may try to present him/herself to others in a socially desirable manner (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 1999). Parents are likely to “fake being good” in the sense of minimizing or denying negative behaviors (Milner & Crouch, 1997). In the case of child victimization, they are likely to conceal violent acts against their child. Indeed, several studies have addressed the challenges of identifying parent perpetrators. It may be even more difficult to do so when the child victims are too young to provide consistent and reliable reports (Ghetti, Goodman, Eisen, Qin, & Davis, 2002). Despite the general acknowledgment of the impact of social desirability on parent-reported child violence, the degree of concealment or underreporting due to this factor has not yet been conclusively established. One study involving records from child protective services estimates that 47% of parents with a history of child abuse perpetration partially deny or conceal this behavior when under investigation (Lanyon, Dannenbaum, & Brown, 1991), reflecting a high likelihood of underreporting among abusive parents.

In addition to social desirability, certain personality characteristics may also contribute to the potential bias in parental reports. For example, Graham, Weiner, Cobb, and Henderson (2001) found that abusive parents are likely to perceive their child as more responsible for harsh punishments, and justify their harsh parenting and dismiss their own abusive behaviors. Furthermore, shame and fear of future legal consequences have also been found to play a role in underreporting among parents (Appel & Holden, 1998). Parents with a history of child maltreatment are more willing to acknowledge their nonviolent disciplinary acts, psychological violence, and neglect than to report their use of physical violence (Bennett, Sullivan, & Lewis, 2006). This discrepancy in the willingness to report across maltreatment types may result from fear of the more severe legal consequences of physical violence than of the other three kinds of child victimization.

But what if the victimization does not involve parents? For example, when the victimization occurs outside the family and the perpetrator is a stranger, the effect of social desirability, external attribution, and fear of legal consequences on underreporting should be minimal. If these possible contributing factors to parents' inaccuracy are suppressed, parental reports should be at least better matched to those from the child or the third parties. Given the scarcity of existing studies which match parental and child reports of victimization that occurs outside the family, one could not make concrete conclusion on whether parental reports could be as accurate as those reported by children. However, the work of Lee, Lansford, Pettit, Bates, and Dodge (2012), which compares fathers' and mothers' reports of victimization in the context of spouses' abusive parenting, might provide some insights to this issue. Lee and colleagues show that parents are likely to underreport their spouse's abusive behaviors toward their child. They suggest that there are some factors other than social desirability contributing to the low accuracy of parental reports.

Research Gap

Because of the scarcity of studies comparing parental reports and child reports of the latter's experience of violence in contexts other than maltreatment by parents, it remains uncertain whether or not parents are reliable to serve as the single source of information about child victimization. One may argue for the usefulness of parental reports of victimization in practice; however, it could not be omitted that the importance of parental reports undoubtedly increases when the child victims are too young or are not mentally capable of reporting their victimization experiences. Assessing the accuracy of parental reports in comparison to child reports is therefore of great significance.

As discussed earlier, parents may not be very reliable as the single informants of child victimization for several reasons. For example, they may fail to detect the victimization incidents that occur outside the family; they may have memory limitations or recall biases; and they may be reluctant to report the incidents when they are the one who inflict the violence against their children (Briere, 1992; McGee, Wolfe, Yuen, Wilson, & Carnochan, 1995). Parents' failure to detect victimization against their children is not a rare case. Research shows that parents are not sufficiently aware of school bullying in part because their children do not disclose their experiences with bullying to their parents (Mishna, 2004). In fact, less than two-thirds

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