



Development and initial psychometric properties of the Computer Assisted Maltreatment Inventory (CAMI): A comprehensive self-report measure of child maltreatment history[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The present study reports on the development and initial psychometric properties of the Computer Assisted Maltreatment Inventory (CAMI), a web-based self-report measure of child maltreatment history, including sexual and physical abuse, exposure to interparental violence, psychological abuse, and neglect.

Methods: The CAMI was administered to a geographically diverse sample of college students ($N = 1398$). For validation purposes, participants also completed a widely used measure of maltreatment (Childhood Trauma Questionnaire) as well as measures of social desirability. To examine test–retest reliability, a subset of participants ($n = 283$) completed the CAMI a second time 2–4 weeks after the initial administration.

Results: Short-term test–retest reliability of the CAMI subscales was good to strong, as was internal consistency on applicable scales. Criterion-related validity of the CAMI's composite abuse severity scores was supported through predicted discriminative correlations with subscales of the CTQ. The CAMI subscales showed comparable or weaker associations with measures of social desirability than did the CTQ. Although both measures were more strongly associated with a need for approval than other aspects of social desirability, these correlations were still rather low in magnitude and in a range typical of many clinical measures.

Conclusions: The present findings as well as the rich descriptive data and flexibility offered by computer administration suggest that the CAMI is a promising instrument for the comprehensive assessment of maltreatment history from adults.

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Introduction

Much of our current understanding about child maltreatment and its long-term correlates comes from studies using retrospective assessments in which adults report about their own child maltreatment experiences. For example, the well-established associations between early abuse and adult psychopathology have been revealed primarily through retrospective self-report surveys (e.g., Molnar, Buka, & Kessler, 2001; Nelson et al., 2002). Unfortunately, considering the prevalence and importance of studies using retrospective methods, too little attention has been paid to development of psychometrically sound measures that provide comprehensive information about a range of child abuse experiences. Although there are exceptions (e.g., Higgins & McCabe, 2001; Smith, Lam, Bifulco, & Checkley, 2002), researchers often have relied on “home-made” measures of a single abuse type—instruments with few or no known psychometric properties. In reviewing measures for assessing childhood sexual abuse (CSA), Hulme (2004) noted that 50% of 116 total studies used instruments constructed by their authors; only one of these studies offered any psychometric support beyond face validity. Similarly, a review of retrospective questionnaires revealed that only one child maltreatment measure had been validated using an independent criterion (Roy & Perry, 2004). To help address this problem, we have initiated the development of the Computer Assisted Maltreatment Inventory (CAMI), a web-based instrument designed to assess all major forms of child maltreatment, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, neglect, and exposure to interparental violence (IPV). Development of the CAMI is an ongoing process. Prior studies have compared mode of administration of the CAMI (DiLillo, DeGue, Kras, Di Loreto-Colgan, & Nash, 2006) and issues of sensitivity and specificity in detecting abuse (DiLillo et al., 2006b). The current paper details the next step in the CAMI's development by providing initial reliability and validity data from a large, geographically diverse sample of college students, who are among the most commonly studied populations in retrospective studies of child maltreatment (Rind, Tromovitch, & Bauserman, 1998).

Description of the Computer Assisted Maltreatment Inventory (CAMI)

Assessment of multiple maltreatment types. A common practice in past research is to assess only the form of maltreatment that is of primary interest in a given study. However, recent findings suggest that the assessment of single abuse types is overly narrow. Rather than occurring in isolation, abuse types frequently overlap and tend to have a cumulative impact on later functioning (e.g., Clemmons, DiLillo, Martinez, DeGue, & Jeffcott, 2003; Dong et al., 2004; Higgins & McCabe, 2001). Further, exposure to IPV (also called “witnessing domestic violence”) often co-occurs with other abuse types (Appel & Holden, 1998) and is considered part of the constellation of abusive experiences that predict long-term psychosocial problems (Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003). This emerging picture of overlapping abuse types and their additive impact underscores a need for researchers to account for all forms of abuse.

A behaviorally specific, multidimensional view of maltreatment. The CAMI uses behaviorally specific items to assess each abuse type. This approach has been advocated on both theoretical and empirical grounds as superior to those using more subjective, participant-defined criteria, which tend to produce lower reporting rates (e.g., Fricker, Smith, Davis, & Hanson, 2003; Silvern, Waelde, Baughan, Karyl, & Kaersvang, 2000). In addition to simply detecting whether maltreatment has occurred, the CAMI's behaviorally specific items assess key aspects of abuse experiences, including the nature and frequency of abusive acts, perpetrator identity, age at onset and termination of abuse, methods of coercion, and any resulting injuries. This approach is supported by results linking each of these dimensions to increased short-term (e.g., English et al., 2005) and more enduring negative outcomes (e.g., Bifulco, Moran, Baines, Bunn, & Stanford, 2002). Together, the empirically relevant dimensions assessed by the CAMI produce a continuous measure of severity that not only expands the range of research questions that can be addressed (e.g., possible “dose–response” effects of abuse; Anda et al., 2006), but also increases statistical power (compared to dichotomization).

To accommodate differences in the way researchers define maltreatment types, the CAMI's structure also allows flexibility in operationalizing each form of abuse. In the case of sexual abuse, for example, studies vary in the upper age used to define “childhood,” in whether non-contact activities like exhibitionism are classified as abuse, and in whether minimum perpetrator-victim age difference should be part of the definition. Similar questions characterize the definition of exposure to IPV (Mohr, Noone Lutz, Fantuzzo, & Perry, 2000), including whether “exposure” should be limited to actually witnessing interparental violence, or whether hearing such acts or simply seeing the aftermath (e.g., a mother's bruised face) should constitute exposure. Underlying issues of definitional variability is the notion that concepts of child maltreatment and adequacy of parenting are socially constructed and influenced by norms that vary across time, communities, and cultural contexts (D'Cruz, 2004; Lowe, Pavkov, Casanova, & Wetchler, 2005). Thus, it is important that instruments can be adapted to operationalize maltreatment in accordance with the aims and theoretical basis of a particular study.

Focus of the present study

Despite its potential strengths, the CAMI's utility depends on a demonstration of acceptable psychometric properties, including strong test–retest and internal reliability, criterion-related validity, and freedom from social desirability biases. Although concordance rates ranging from 81% to 91% have been found for the temporal stability of self-reported sexual abuse for intervals spanning 2 weeks to 2 years (e.g., Friedrich, Talley, Panser, Fett, & Zinsmeister, 1997), it is unknown whether

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