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Violence and maltreatment in Tanzanian families—Findings from a nationally representative sample of secondary school students and their parents

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ABSTRACT

Though the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations aim to end all forms of violence against minors, child maltreatment remains a globally prevalent phenomenon. Despite the fact that parents in numerous countries apply violent discipline methods to control children's behavior, little is known about the prevalence of maltreatment and violent discipline in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this study, we examined the prevalence of maltreatment and violent discipline from both the adolescents' and parents' perspectives. In addition, we explored risk factors that could be associated with violent discipline by parents. We administered questionnaires to a nationally representative sample of 700 Tanzanian secondary school students (52% girls, mean age: 14.92 years, SD = 1.02, range: 12–17) and 333 parents or primary guardians (53% females; mean age: of 43.47 years, SD = 9.02, range: 19–71). More than 90% of all students reported exposure to violent discipline by a parent within the past year. Concurrently, more than 80% of parents acknowledged using violent discipline techniques. Using a path model, we found that violent discipline by parents was associated with parental stress. Other risk factors contributed to a higher stress level but were not directly linked to maltreatment. Our findings indicate high levels of violent discipline in Tanzanian families. There is a pressing need to design and implement interventions that prevent children from experiencing violence at home. Reducing parents' stress levels may be a starting point for intervention. Yet, due to the high levels of violent discipline, societal beliefs also need to be considered.

1. Background

Child maltreatment refers to any act of abusive or neglectful behavior by a parent or caregiver that results in harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child. The abusive actions referred here may include the use of words or overt actions, are deliberate and intentional, and can involve physical, emotional or sexual transgressions (Gilbert et al., 2009; Katz, Affi, Taillieu, & Cheung, 2015; Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon, & Arias, 2008). Following this definition, the use of any physical or psychological force with the intention of causing physical or emotional pain for the purpose of correcting or controlling the child's behavior, is considered an act of child maltreatment due to the potential harm incurred by the child and the continuous threat or stressor posed to the child (Hecker,

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Hermenau, Salmen, Teicher, & Elbert, 2016; Norman et al., 2012). Neglectful behavior on the other hand includes the failure to provide for a child's basic physical, emotional, educational, and health needs and protection of a child from harm or potential harm (Morantz, Cole, Ayaya, Ayuku, & Braitstein, 2013; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Van IJzendoorn, 2013).

Although child maltreatment is one of the crucial social challenges worldwide and is associated with substantial impairments of social wellbeing and health (Dubowitz & Bennett, 2007; Gershoff, 2013; Stoltenborgh, van IJzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011), prevalence rates from low-income countries especially in Sub-Saharan Africa remain scarce (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Alink, & van IJzendoorn, 2012; Straus, 2010).

1.1. Violence against children in families

Evidence from global research indicates that violence against children, perpetuated by parents as a way to deal with children's misbehavior, is both more prevalent and severe worldwide than is generally understood (Durrant, 2008; Gershoff, 2010; Lansford et al., 2015).

The few reports and studies from low-income countries report high rates of child maltreatment in families (GIEACPC, 2015, GIEACPC, 2016a; Hecker, Hermenau, Isele, & Elbert, 2014; Hermenau et al., 2011; UNICEF, 2014). For example, in their study on the level of violent discipline in 24 countries using data from 30,470 families, Lansford and Deater-Deckard (2012) indicated high prevalence and strong belief in the usefulness of violence in dealing with children's misbehavior. However, there is wide variability across countries regarding the use of violence in families (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, & Alink, 2013). A UNICEF report (2010) focusing on the prevalence of child maltreatment in 35 low- and middle-income countries indicated that three out of four children aged 2–14 experienced physical punishment or psychological aggression in their homes during the month before the survey. The prevalence ranged from 38% in Bosnia-Herzegovina to almost 95% in Yemen; the rate of harsh discipline was above 70% in three quarters of the countries surveyed. This indicates the extent to which children in families worldwide are facing high levels of violence in their families, mostly with the parents' intentions to correct misbehavior.

The endorsement of violence as a means for discipline and behavioral management have been reported in various countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (GIEACPC, 2015; Oburu & Palmérus, 2003; UNICEF, 2011). For example, a UNICEF report (2014) surveying 62 countries (23 from Africa) between 2005 and 2013 indicated that the average prevalence of violent discipline strategies and psychological aggression in families was up to 80% for children in the month prior to the survey. Consistently, prevalence of violence against children in West and Central Africa was recently reported to be 90%, in East and in North Africa it was 89% (GIEACPC, 2016a).

In Tanzania, a national survey by UNICEF (2011) involving 3700 respondents aged 13–24 years, found that almost three quarters of the participants had been slapped, pushed, punched, kicked, beaten up, attacked or threatened with a weapon by a relative or authority figure during their childhood, and 51% of the minors in the sample had experienced physical and emotional abuse in the past year. Furthermore, only 28% of secondary school students disagreed in another study that they were spanked or hit often by their parents or guardians before the age of 12 years (Straus, 2010). This high rate indicates that harsh discipline by parents and guardians is very common in Tanzanian families (Hecker et al., 2014; Hermenau et al., 2011; Hermenau, Hecker, Elbert, & Ruf-Leuschner, 2014) and can be linked to laws permitting the use of corporal punishment for justifiable correction (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (GIEACPC, 2016b; United Republic of Tanzania, 2009). Though these high rates of maltreatment and violent discipline have been reported in NGO reports and studies examining non-representative samples, no prevalence data based on representative samples including both the children's and the parents' perspectives is currently available.

1.2. Child neglect in families

Child neglect affects the lives of many children worldwide (Gilbert et al., 2009; UNICEF, 2014). For example, in the United States of America, investigations of child protective services determined that approximately 59% of child maltreatment victims were neglect cases, and approximately 34% of child maltreatment-related fatalities were attributed to neglect (Grogan-Kaylor & Otis, 2003). A study of parents of 3–6 year old children conducted across 15 provinces in China found that 28% of parents reported neglectful behavior (UNICEF, 2012). A meta-analysis on the global prevalence of neglect (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, et al., 2013; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Alink, & van IJzendoorn, 2015) provided evidence that physical and emotional neglect are a global problem touching the lives of many children especially in low-resource countries. Moreover, a meta-analysis representing 15 studies from Sub-Saharan Africa reported that children and youth in many African countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Malawi had experiences of intra-household discrimination and material, psychological, and educational neglect (Morantz, Cole, Ayaya, et al., 2013). In addition, different forms of parental neglect were described in Kenya (Morantz, Cole, Ayaya, et al., 2013; Oburu & Palmérus, 2003). In Tanzania, only two studies (Hermenau, Eggert, Landolt, & Hecker, 2015; Lekule, 2014) investigated child neglect. However, these studies involved mainly orphans or children in alternative care settings. While neglect is globally relevant, no data from community-based or representative samples are available from Tanzania.

1.3. Associations between parental and familial risk factors, parental stress, and maltreatment

It is well known that parental behaviors towards their children are linked to their emotions and mental states, which are also associated with factors and conditions within the family. For example, the degree of parental warmth or violence towards their children was associated with personal burdens and stress and in turn stress was predicted by different familial risk factors, including

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