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Research article

The influence of geographical and economic factors in estimates of childhood abuse and neglect using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire: A worldwide meta-regression analysis[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This multilevel meta-analysis examined the effects of geographical and economic factors on worldwide childhood maltreatment estimates measured by the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) short-form. The primary outcome extracted was continuous scores on the CTQ subscales – emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect – and total score. Geographical, economical and methodological variables were extracted for use as covariates in meta-regression models. A literature search identified 288 studies suitable for the CTQ total score analysis ($N = 59,692$) and 189 studies suitable for maltreatment subtype analysis ($N = 44,832$). We found that Europe and Asia were associated with lower CTQ estimates while South America presented the highest estimates among continents. Specifically, studies from China, Netherlands and United Kingdom presented the lowest maltreatment estimates. Furthermore, high-income countries presented lower CTQ physical neglect estimates in comparison to low- or middle-income countries, while per-capita gross domestic product of countries was negatively associated with childhood physical neglect estimates. Despite the influence of methodological covariates, these findings indicate that geographical and economic factors could influence variations of childhood maltreatment estimates around the world, particularly when assessed by a structured standardized questionnaire.

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Introduction

The problem of childhood maltreatment has become more evident internationally over the last 20 years (UNICEF, 2012a, 2012b). It has been widely reported that sexual, physical, and psychological abuse, as well as physical or emotional neglect, are strong social and environmental risk factors for many of the leading causes of death, disease, and disability during all stages

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of life (Anda et al., 2009; Bellis, Hughes, Leckenby, Perkins, & Lowey, 2014; Felitti et al., 1998). Despite important progress in understanding the consequences of childhood maltreatment for mental and physical health, these adverse developmental experiences still offer unique challenges for global public health (Norman et al., 2012).

Specifically, growing evidence suggests that childhood abuse and neglect are more frequent in less developed countries and that cultural and economic factors might strongly influence such rates (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). For example, two previous meta-analysis found higher childhood sexual abuse prevalence rates in Africa and Australia, whereas the lowest rates were reported in Europe and Asia (Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gómez-Benito, 2009; Stoltenborgh, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). Regarding physical violence, a previous large survey found lower estimates in the USA than in four developing countries (Chile, Egypt, India, and the Philippines), but similar estimates were observed among countries when moderate forms of physical abuse were estimated (Krug et al., 2002). Socio-economic effects on childhood maltreatment estimates were also observed in single-country analyses in which family income level status was found to be negatively associated with childhood neglect and physical and sexual abuse rates (Stith et al., 2009; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011).

However, previous evidences are conflicting and limited in a number of important ways. First, it is difficult to obtain official global data for comparisons between geographical regions, since data from law and policy agencies might not be accurate and registration procedures are different between countries (Fairbank & Fairbank, 2009). Second, given the lack of studies across a variety of countries and continents, previous systematic reviews have been unable to investigate the influence of geographical and economic factors on rates of childhood maltreatment subtypes other than sexual abuse, such as neglect and emotional abuse, or found no evidence of such effect in the case of physical abuse (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van Ijzendoorn, 2013; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn, & Alink, 2013). Finally, unsystematic methods of childhood abuse and neglect assessment are key obstacles for this kind of research, and can both result in under- or over-reporting of childhood maltreatment rates between countries.

Therefore, an alternative approach is to generate childhood maltreatment estimates across worldwide samples based on the same method of assessment, contrasting previous meta-analysis that included heterogeneous methods. Given that meta-analytic standardization functions might destabilize the investigation of effects of interest, as in the case of multiple types of metrics, a homogeneous approach using raw metric data from the same instrument have been preferred to make cross-study comparisons (Bond, Wiitala, & Richard, 2003). In this sense, the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) short-form is an internationally accepted tool for the assessment of childhood maltreatment exposure (Bernstein et al., 2003) and there are several studies using this instrument in many different countries (Grassi-Oliveira et al., 2014). Thus, the CTQ has become the most widely used self-report questionnaire for the investigation of different forms of abuse and neglect during childhood (Bernstein et al., 1994; Pietrini, Lelli, Verardi, Silvestri, & Faravelli, 2010; Teicher & Parigger, 2015) and it is a more reliable tool compared with other methods of assessment, such as staff observations and parental reports (Polanczyk et al., 2009). Although it investigates retrospectively maltreatment reports and concerns have been expressed about the reliability of such methods, including arguments of memory impairments biases and specific mood-congruent memory biases, Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib (1993) in their comprehensive review, found very limited evidence to support these criticisms.

Hence, the aim of this study was twofold: (1) to compare estimates of childhood maltreatment between different geopolitical locations (countries and continents); and (2) to investigate whether the country income classification might influence such estimates. For these purposes, we conducted a systematic review of studies that used the CTQ (cross-sectional, case-control or longitudinal studies) and performed multilevel meta-analyses and meta-regressions to investigate the effects of covariates on the heterogeneity of childhood maltreatment estimates, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and physical and emotional neglect. Additional analyses also investigated the effects of sociodemographic and methodological factors on mean estimates.

Method

We conducted a systematic review of studies that used the CTQ, in adherence with PRISMA guidelines (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & Group, 2009). The protocol was finalized prior to conducting the systematic review and was registered at PROSPERO (2014:CRD42014008703). There were no restrictions to study language.

Main Variables of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire

The CTQ is a self-report questionnaire that can be used by individuals aged 12 years old and over. The short version of the CTQ is derived from a 70-item retrospective questionnaire, for which participants were required to rate the frequency that events related to child abuse and neglect occurred when they “were growing up” (Bernstein et al., 1994). The short version is composed of 28 items; its psychometric properties have been extensively investigated in many different countries with good evidences of validity and reliability (Bernstein et al., 2003; Gerdner & Allgulander, 2009; Grassi-Oliveira et al., 2014; Karos, Niederstrasser, Abidi, Bernstein, & Bader, 2014; Klinitzke, Romppel, Hauser, Brahler, & Glaesmer, 2012; Paquette, Laporte, Bigras, & Zoccolillo, 2004; Thombs, Bernstein, Lobbstaal, & Arntz, 2009). Thus, to comprise more studies with the same metric, we opted only to include studies that used the short-form of the instrument.

The CTQ has five subscales – emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect (Supplementary Table A). Each CTQ subscale assesses each subtype of childhood maltreatment on a five-point Likert-type

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