

CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

CHILD MALTREATMENT has occurred throughout history and is known across cultures (Eisenberg, 1981; Korbin, 1981; Lynch, 1985; Radbill, 1987). Nevertheless, child maltreatment emerged from an obscure radiological diagnosis to a matter of public and professional concern in the United States only in the early 1960s (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, DroegemueLLer, & Silver, 1962). Questions then arose as to whether child maltreatment was unique to the United States. The repeated experience of nations first denying the existence of child maltreatment only to "discover" it later (Kempe, 1978), stimulated interest in the broader cross-cultural record. A cross-cultural perspective on child maltreatment challenges complacency about what is good or bad for children and forces a re-examination of commonly held definitions of and causal explanations for child abuse and neglect. In looking ahead to the year 2007, this paper will consider cross-cultural definitional issues and research directions that must be addressed within any multi-cultural nation and by the larger international community.

A growing international literature on child maltreatment has emerged since the late 1970s (see, for example: Agathonos, 1983; Agathonos, Stathacoupoulou, Adam, & Nakou, 1982; Arnold, 1982; Bhattacharyya, 1979, 1981; de Silva, 1981; Fergusson, Flemming, & O'Neill, 1972; Haditono, 1981; Ikeda, 1982; Jinadu, 1980; Kellerman, 1979; Loening, 1981; Mehra, 1982; Mehta, 1982; Mehta, Prabhu, & Mistry, 1985; Nathan & Hwang, 1981; Nwako, 1974; Okeahialam, 1984; Oyemade, 1980; Semiawan, 1981; Sereewat, 1983; Tevoedjre, 1981; Van Staden, 1979). At international congresses and regional meetings sponsored by the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN), more and more nations participate, indicating that child maltreatment is a concern within their boundaries (e.g., Agathonos, 1988; Davis, 1987). Child advocates, social workers, health care providers, researchers and educators in diverse nations have sought to document the existence of child maltreatment in their own countries as a first step in combatting the problem. Multiple forms of child maltreatment are considered in this literature, including physical abuse and neglect, sexual molestation, child prostitution, nutritional deprivation, emotional maltreatment, and institutional abuse. While infectious disease, diarrhea, and malnutrition dwarf the magnitude of child maltreatment in many developing nations, it nevertheless has arisen as a problem of concern. This literature indicates the breadth of child maltreatment issues that cut across cultural and national boundaries.

A second primary source of cross-cultural literature encompasses social and medical re-

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searchers who have sought to delineate the parameters and assess the patterns of child maltreatment across diverse cultural and ethnic groups (see, for example: Cohn, 1982; Dubanoski, 1981; Dubanoski & Snyder, 1980; Eisenberg, 1981; Finkelhor & Korbin, 1988; Garbarino & Ebata, 1983; Gelles & Pedrick-Cornell, 1983; Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Green, 1978; Kammerman, 1975; Korbin, 1977, 1981, 1987a, 1987b, 1987c; Lauderdale, Valiunas, & Anderson, 1980; Levinson, 1981; Rohner, 1975; Scheper-Hughes, 1988; Searly & Lauderdale, 1983; Taylor & Newberger, 1979). While this literature is limited by definitional and methodological problems, it nevertheless underlines the importance of a cultural perspective in practice and theory.

Cross-cultural information on child abuse and neglect is, unfortunately, limited. Since child maltreatment is a low base-rate behavior, it may not be observed in smaller societies during stays by outsiders, or cases may be so few that they are difficult to interpret and explain. These cases, then, do not find their way into the literature and, thus, do not contribute to the understanding of patterns within and across cultures. At this point in our state of knowledge, the absence of published or documented cases of child maltreatment does not necessarily mean an absence of the problem. Literature on child maltreatment in one nation may simply mean that a professional or concerned citizen has become aware of and interested in the problem, oftentimes through international networking. Reports of child prostitution in the Netherlands, or Sri Lanka, for example, do not necessarily mean that the problem is absent in neighboring countries. The global distribution of different types of child maltreatment is a pressing question that should receive greater research attention by the year 2007.

CROSS-CULTURAL DEFINITIONS

Children throughout the world suffer from an array of threats to their development, well-being, and survival. They suffer from poverty, famine, disease, and war. They suffer as they navigate the child-rearing practices and rites of their diverse cultures. And, they suffer from acts of omission and commission by their parents and caretakers. Not all harm that befalls children is necessarily maltreatment. Finkelhor and Korbin (1988) have defined child abuse as "the portion of harm to children that results from human action that is proscribed, proximate, and preventable." This definition serves two primary purposes. First, it distinguishes child maltreatment from other social, economic, and health problems facing children in a diversity of nations. And second, it is sufficiently flexible to apply to a range of situations in a variety of social and cultural contexts.

Cross-cultural variability in child rearing beliefs and behaviors makes it clear that there is not a universal standard for optimal child care nor for child abuse and neglect. This presents a dilemma. Failure to allow for a cultural perspective in defining child abuse and neglect promotes an ethnocentric position in which one's own set of cultural beliefs and practices are presumed to be preferable and superior to all others. On the other hand, a stance of extreme cultural relativism, in which all judgements of humane treatment of children are suspended in the name of cultural rights, may be used to justify a lesser standard of care for some children. To address this dilemma, definitional issues must be structured into a coherent framework so that child abuse and neglect can be identified within and across cultural contexts.

Three levels have been useful in formulating culturally appropriate definitions of child maltreatment (Korbin, 1981, 1987a): (1) cultural differences in child rearing practices and beliefs; (2) idiosyncratic departure from one's cultural continuum of acceptable behavior; and (3) societal harm to children.

The first level encompasses practices that are viewed as acceptable in the culture in which they occur, but as abusive or neglectful by outsiders. Cultural conflict in the definition of child

abuse and neglect is most likely at this level. The literature is replete with examples of such conflict (Korbin, 1977, 1981). The nature of human infants and the requirements of adult society dictate that all cultures must share some facets of their child rearing practices and beliefs. When there is congruence of child care patterns, there is also likely to be agreement in definitions of child abuse and neglect. As cultures vary in their child care patterns, the possibility of conflict in defining child maltreatment increases.

Anthropologists, missionaries, and others who have lived in diverse cultures with their young children have come into direct contact with different perceptions of what is abusive or neglectful. For example, Emelie Olson, who conducted anthropological field work in Turkey, was accompanied by her 18-month-old daughter. Olson worried that Turkish infants were uncomfortable and would suffer ill effects as she observed them sweating profusely under multiple layers of clothing, even in the warmest weather. The Turkish women, however, predicted dire consequences when Olson let her daughter play outside in a tub of water on a warm day, in direct violation of their belief that small children become chilled very easily and die. Olson's Turkish neighbors also urged her to kiss and praise the genitals of her young daughter as a positive and motherly action, something that would have been considered sexual abuse in Olson's own cultural context (Olson, 1981).

Conflict in defining child maltreatment is not limited to that between industrialized and developing, Western and non-Western, or colonial and subjugated peoples. Conflict also ensues among small scale societies living in proximity to one another. Turnbull, for example, has written about the 'Mbuti of the Ituri Forest of Zaire and their Bantu neighbors. The 'Mbuti did not practice initiation rites, and regarded the rites of the nearby Bantu, involving circumcision, deprivation of food and sleep, and frequent beatings and hazings, as unduly harsh and abusive. The Bantu villagers, however, regarded the 'Mbuti as exceedingly neglectful of their sons' welfare. Without rites of initiation, in Bantu eyes, boys were forever doomed to the status of children. They could not marry, have children, own land, or be a full participant in the culture. With increasing contact and economic interdependence, the 'Mbuti reluctantly agreed to have their sons initiated alongside the Bantu boys. Nevertheless, the 'Mbuti continued to regard the Bantu rites as excessively harsh and interfered in the rituals by bringing their boys food and blankets and trying to shield them from pain. This type of interference was strictly forbidden and constituted further proof for the Bantu that the 'Mbuti were inadequate parents who coddled their sons instead of properly preparing them for manhood (Turnbull, 1961). This conflict between 'Mbuti and Bantu is just as meaningful as conflict between larger nation-states or within multicultural societies.

At the second level, idiosyncratic abuse or neglect signals a departure from the continuum of culturally-acceptable behavior. While cultures differ in their definitions of child maltreatment, all have criteria for behaviors that fall outside the range of acceptability, and some individuals in all cultures exceed the boundaries of their society's standards. It is at this level that child maltreatment is most legitimately identified across cultural contexts. Some societies, for example, permit fondling of the genitals of infants and very young children to soothe them or get them to sleep. However such fondling of older children, or for the sexual gratification of adults, would fall outside of the acceptable cultural continuum (Korbin, 1987c).

And, at the third level, societal conditions such as poverty, inadequate housing, poor maternal and child health care, and lack of nutritional resources either contribute powerfully to child maltreatment or are considered maltreatment in and of themselves. While there can be no doubt that these conditions seriously compromise the survival and well-being of children, they are beyond individual parental control. This level refers to the degree of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and hunger that nations are willing to tolerate for children and families. But, at this level, the whole family suffers from these conditions, and that the children are impacted along with the adults is beyond the control of individual parents. It is

worthwhile to note that in the United States in 1987 approximately one-fourth of all children under six live below the federal poverty level (National Center for Children in Poverty, 1990).

Definitional difficulties have arisen from confounding these three levels. An extensive anthropological literature on cultural diversity demands these levels of distinction. Literature from developing nations also has differentiated traditional cultural practices that may involve pain and suffering from idiosyncratic forms of abuse and neglect that have recently been identified and from larger societal problems affecting children (e.g., Okeahialam, 1984).

By the year 2007, progress must be made in cross-cultural definitions of child maltreatment for the purposes of both research and action. Careful attention is needed to determine the parameters for acceptable and unacceptable behavior both between and within cultures. The criteria for determinations that child maltreatment has occurred must also be carefully examined. Whether child maltreatment is defined on the basis of caretaker behavior, consequences to the child, or a combination of indicators, the cultural context must be considered. With respect to caretaker behaviors, the same acts may have varying meanings and interpretations in different cultures. Constant physical contact with an infant, for example, can be described objectively across cultures. However, it may carry a meaning of indulgence in societies with low infant mortality while signalling a concern for physical survival in societies with high infant mortality (LeVine, 1977; Super, 1984). Similarly, physical harm is inadequate in itself as the sole defining criterion in child maltreatment. It is not meaningful to equate bruises inflicted on a child by an angry parent, for example, with bruises inflicted during the Vietnamese medical practice of "coin rubbing" (Yeatman, Shaw, Barlow, & Bartlett, 1976).

By the year 2007, we should strive to have more satisfactory answers to the following definitional questions: What is the spectrum of caretaker behavior accepted by different cultures? Under what conditions does an act exceed the cultural continuum of acceptability? Are caretaker behaviors or consequences to the child more important in determinations of abuse? How much overlap exists among cultures? Is a universal definition possible or will definitions of necessity be culture specific?

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

The most promising contribution of a cross-cultural perspective is an enhanced understanding of the conditions under which child maltreatment is more or less likely to occur (Korbin, 1987b). As we move towards the year 2007, it will be more useful to design research concerning the factors that promote or prevent child maltreatment cross-culturally rather than trying to compare incidence and prevalence statistics that are unreliable even in nations with legally mandated reporting systems. Based on available cross-cultural evidence, we can begin to identify vulnerable categories of children and circumstances in which children are at greater risk of maltreatment (Korbin, 1987b).

Since patterns in the antecedents and consequences of child rearing practices can be identified cross-culturally (e.g., Minturn & Lambert, 1964; Whiting & Whiting, 1975), regularities in the antecedents and consequences of child maltreatment similarly should be amenable to cross-cultural research (Korbin, 1981; Rohner, 1975). Since intra-cultural variability can be equal to or greater than inter-cultural variability (Minturn & Lambert, 1964), for any factor to be implicated in the etiology of child maltreatment it must have explanatory power both within and between societies.

Vulnerable Children

The cross-cultural literature suggests that child maltreatment is less likely in cultures in which children are highly valued for their economic utility, for perpetuating family lines and

the cultural heritage, and as sources of emotional pleasure and satisfaction. Nevertheless, even in cultures that place a high value on children in general, some children are less valued than others. This disvalue or undervalue may be expressed in a range of behaviors. Such children may be subjected to deliberate infanticide, physical abuse and neglect, sexual or economic exploitation, psychological maltreatment, or selective neglect.

The cross-cultural literature suggests categories of children who are at risk of maltreatment. Some of these categories can be identified through demographic analyses of differential mortality (Johansson, 1984; Scrimshaw, 1978, 1984), while other categories can be identified only with a thorough understanding of the cultural context. Undervalued and disvalued children may be broadly grouped as follows (Korbin, 1987b):

- *Health status.* While the direction of cause and effect is difficult to determine, children whose health status is inferior to that of their siblings or peers are more likely to be accorded a lesser standard of care. In societies with high infant and child mortality, the stronger child is likely to receive preferential care in contrast to the increased resources allocated to an ill infant in societies with low infant mortality (LeVine, 1977). For example, Scheper-Hughes (1984, 1985) found that Brazilian shantytown mothers identified categories of sickly children whose survival was considered too risky for substantial caretaking investment. These children were poorly cared for and often died unattended.

Malnourished children also are vulnerable to maltreatment. The quality of maternal care and feeding patterns vary among siblings, and only one child in a family may be malnourished (Chavez, Martines, & Yaschine, 1975; Latham, 1974). Apathetic, anorexic, and unresponsive behaviors of malnourished children may fail to elicit the parental care needed to improve their health status, and thereby, their behavior. Cultural beliefs may further compromise an already malnourished child. In some cultures, children whose behavior is indicative of malnourishment may instead be considered angry at the mother during weaning or jealous of the new sibling. The child is then punished or ignored rather than fed to ameliorate the underlying cause of the behavior.

- *Deformed or handicapped children.* Related to health status, the treatment of deformed or handicapped children varies within and among cultures. These children may be perceived as a supernatural gift and accorded special care. Unfortunately, more often these children are regarded as a burden, an ill-omen, or non-human, thus falling outside of usual protections for children.
- *Excess or unwanted children.* Children who stress family resources also may be subject to maltreatment. Demographic analyses indicate that later born children and children too closely spaced are less likely to survive (Scrimshaw, 1978). Determinations of family size and "too many" children are, of course, culture-bound and reflect such factors as subsistence economy and infant mortality rates.
- *Children born under unusual, stigmatized, or difficult circumstances.* Conditions surrounding birth may increase the risk of subsequent maltreatment. Among the Bariba of West Africa, witches traditionally were identified at birth by position or appearance, and subject to deliberate infanticide or sale as slaves to a neighboring group (Sargeant, 1984). Multiple births may also place children at risk in cultures in which such births are regarded as more akin to animal litters, as ill omens, or with ambivalence (Levy, 1964).
- *Developmental stage.* Children may be vulnerable to maltreatment at normal developmental stages. In industrialized nations, developmental stages have been suggested as placing children at increased risk of maltreatment. Toddlers and adolescents, both of whom display oppositional behaviors, may be at greater risk for maltreatment (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). In the course of toilet training, toddlers may be at increased risk of physical assault, including a "dunking" pattern of burns inflicted in scalding water. In societies in

which children are not expected to follow certain rules until a later age, parental anger and the potential for abuse is reduced. In China, for example, a toddler's pants are slit open so that the child can defecate or urinate without soiling himself/herself or causing disruption to caretakers. The possibility of conflict in a battle of wills is thereby reduced.

- *Gender.* Cultural beliefs about the care and value of males versus females can compromise health and survival. In Ecuador, for example, McKee (1984) found that adherence to traditional beliefs led to shorter breast feeding for females than males. In societies with a strong son preference (for example, India), daughters are at greater risk for a spectrum of maltreatment. Young girls are less likely to be fed as well as their brothers or to receive the same standard of medical care (Miller, 1981, 1984; Poffenberger, 1981). In Greece, higher expectations of boys and harsher punishment of them is associated with more males than females being reported for physical abuse (Agathonos, Stathacoupoulou, Adam, & Nakou, 1982).
- *Behaviors and personality characteristics.* Categories of disvalued or undervalued children cannot necessarily be identified by physical characteristics, but may vary across cultures. In these cases, careful ethnographic information is required. The same behavior may be interpreted differently in different cultures. For example, among the Machiguenga of the Peruvian Amazon (Johnson, 1981), children who display tantrums or anger are highly disvalued. Yet, among the Yanomamo, aggressiveness is so highly valued that young boys are encouraged to be "fierce" even to the point of striking their fathers (Chagnon, 1968).
- *Diminished social supports.* The crosscultural literature strongly suggests that children with diminished social supports are vulnerable to maltreatment. In the LeVines' (1981) work in East Africa, for example, children from out-of-wedlock births accounted for only 2.5% of the population, but 25% of malnourished children. Fraser and Kilbride (1980) similarly noted that children from intertribal marriages among a group in East Africa were at increased risk of neglect. If the marriage faltered and the children were poorly cared for, neither the kin of the mother nor the father necessarily felt that the children fell under their protection. Illegitimate children among the Chambri of the Sepik could be sold as victims to neighboring groups whose boys were required to commit a homicide to enter manhood (Gewertz, 1977).

Stepchildren are at increased risk of maltreatment in a number of cultures. In the United States, stepchildren are more vulnerable to physical abuse (Daly & Wilson, 1985) and sexual molestation (Finkelhor, 1980; Russell, 1984). Orphans also are at risk of maltreatment unless they become established in a network of concerned kin. In Turkish society, for example, female orphans were vulnerable to sexual assault, after which they had few options but prostitution (Olson, 1981).

Embeddedness of Child Rearing in Social Networks

Even if categories of vulnerable children can be identified cross culturally, the potential for maltreatment can be mitigated by social networks. An understanding of the degree of embeddedness of child rearing in a larger community context can help to assess circumstances that prevent or promote child maltreatment (Korbin, 1987b). When child rearing is a shared concern within a supportive network, the consequences for children of having an inadequate or aggressive parent are diminished. Social networks serve multiple protective functions for children. First, they provide assistance with child care tasks and responsibilities. Second, networks provide options for the temporary and/or permanent redistribution of children. And third, networks afford the context for consensus, scrutiny, and enforcement of standards of child care. Embeddedness of child rearing in kin and community networks acts against the social isolation that has been linked with child maltreatment in industrialized nations (Garbarino & Crouter, 1978; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980; Gelles, 1973).

Assistance. Social networks provide options for assistance with child care. This may take the form of alternative caretakers who provide relief from unremitting responsibility for child care. Cross culturally, mothers who are isolated in child care tasks, with little periodic relief or assistance, are most likely to be harsh and rejecting with their children (Minturn & Lambert, 1964; Rohner, 1975). If alternative caretakers are older children, this experience may prevent later ignorance of child development and age-inappropriate expectations that have been associated with abusive parenting in industrialized nations.

Redistribution. Social networks with shared responsibility for children allow redistribution of children, some of whom might be at risk of abuse or neglect from biological parents. Children who are not wanted by their parents can be absorbed into other households where they are wanted for their economic or emotional contributions. Mechanisms such as child lending, fostering, and informal adoption allow redistribution of children on a temporary or permanent basis. Stack (1974) has written about the practice of informal child lending in black households in the United States. Depending on the need for child helpers and the availability of resources, such as food assistance benefits, children spend time in other households, returning to their own when conditions improve. In some societies, children who exhibit difficult or disvalued behaviors are sent as economic helpers to other households where presumably they will be treated more strictly and forced to behave (Johnson, 1981). Children undergoing developmental stages that might cause difficulties for their parents also can be redistributed if there is a larger network interested in their well-being. Among the Baganda, for instance, children were regularly sent to live with their grandparents during weaning (Ainsworth, 1967). Since the child's behavior was expected to be difficult during this transition, the mother's burden was eased and the potential for problems disarmed. Among the Gonja, boys of 7 or 8 were customarily sent to relatives for an extended period of fosterage during which they were taught rules of proper behavior and economic skills (Goody, 1970). Indulgent and warm relations could be maintained with biological parents while the frustrations and burdens of socialization were transferred to other involved adults.

Among Polynesians, the care of adopted children tends to be warm and indulgent (Carroll, 1970; Gallimore, Boggs, & Jordan, 1974). "Hanai", the Hawaiian term for informal adoption literally means "to feed." Children frequently are adopted simply because of the emotional pleasure derived from them. Hawaiians believe that "a house without children is a house without life" (Young, 1980:12). Adopted children are thought to be at a distinct advantage by having two sets of parents, biological and adoptive, who will care about their welfare.

The impact of redistribution of children, however, is linked to the cultural context. While promoting survival or preventing abuse of some children who might not fare well with their biological parents, redistribution does not necessarily ensure good treatment. Some cultures are explicit in the lack of rewards for rearing someone else's child. The Gusii of East Africa have a proverb that likens the raising of another's child to caring for "cold mucus" (LeVine & LeVine, 1981). In Taiwan, while adopted daughters were legally protected, their actual treatment could be dismal with their status little better than slaves (Wu, 1981). Children who are redistributed to other households primarily for their economic utility are at risk of maltreatment if they fail to be useful. However, adoptive parents have reason to treat their charges well or they may be unable to secure others in the future (Silk, 1980).

Consensus, scrutiny, and enforcement. If child care is a shared responsibility, greater consensus is likely concerning the acceptable boundaries of child rearing methods and goals. Standards are more likely to be enforced and departures are more noticeable. If others are regularly involved in child care, intervention across families is less likely to be viewed as unduly intrusive or a strategy of last resort. If child care tasks and children are shared, rather than consid-

ered the exclusive property of one or two biological parents, a situation is more likely in which "no one needs an invitation to intervene in the case of an overly severe spanking" (Olson, 1981). Among rural Hawaiians, relatives do not hesitate to yell from one house to the next that a spanking has gone on long enough or is too severe for the child's misbehavior. Hawaiian children are quite open about calling for help more quickly and loudly than a spanking might warrant as an effective strategy for disarming an angry parent (Korbin, 1987b). This is in stark contrast to the privacy of the family in the United States, which allows abuse to continue, sometimes to the point of a fatality.

Situations of Rapid Change

Socioeconomic and sociocultural change have been linked with an increase in child maltreatment (Gelles & Pedrick-Cornell, 1983; Korbin, 1981; Okeahialam, 1984). However, the impact of change on child maltreatment is a complex issue. Most often, the literature attributes an increase in child maltreatment to a breakdown in traditional values and practices. Change has been associated too readily with a range of social and individual ills, including child maltreatment. This is due, in part, to a continued reliance on the assumption of a lack of deviance in small scale societies that is not supported by empirical evidence (Edgerton, 1976). However, the cross-cultural literature does suggest that sociocultural and socioeconomic change can have an impact on parent-child relationships and interactions, including the potential for maltreatment. Immigrant and urbanizing families face unique problems that have a potential effect upon child maltreatment. In the change from an agrarian to an urban economy, children become consumers rather than producers and an economic liability rather than an asset (LeVine & LeVine, 1985; Logan, 1979; Olson, 1981). Through formal schooling, immigrant children acquire more knowledge of the new environment than their parents and become less compliant and obedient, providing greater opportunities for parent-child conflict (LeVine & LeVine, 1985). The move from rural to urban areas may isolate families from traditional kin and social networks, thereby decreasing the likelihood that parent-child conflict can be diminished before it escalates to maltreatment (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1981).

Importantly, change can also be in a positive direction. In a 20-year perspective on an Indian community, Minturn (1984) found that improvements in locally available medical care promoted the survival and health of female children, who had previously been at greater risk than males. While parents still favored sons and were less willing to transport daughters equally long distances for medical care, if a clinic was readily accessible, daughters were more likely to receive treatment than in the past.

The costs and benefits of change remain to be assessed. Change may eradicate cultural practices perceived as abusive from outside the culture in question, but increase of idiosyncratic maltreatment. Painful practices such as initiation rites or footbinding may be eradicated, but in the absence of protective networks, children may be more vulnerable to physical or sexual assault by parents.

A cross-cultural perspective provides a wealth of opportunities to test our theories about the occurrence of child maltreatment. By the year 2007, we should work towards utilizing this "natural laboratory" of human behavior.

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