



Child maltreatment in sociocultural context: From a syndrome to the Convention on the Rights of the Child

AGATHONOS-GEORGOPOULOU, H.

Abstract

This study reflects on child maltreatment from a cultural and a historical perspective. Initially, child maltreatment was considered to be a single syndrome ("the battered child syndrome"). Later, more attention has been devoted to the contexts in which child maltreatment occurs, to cultural beliefs and attitudes, economic circumstances and politics. Recently, the Children's Rights Convention appeared as a new paradigm to look at (the prevention of) child maltreatment. The author presents recent empirical findings on the relationship between culture and child maltreatment and discusses the synergies developing between the public health and the child rights approach.

Key words: child maltreatment, Convention on the Rights of the Child, culture, cross-cultural comparisons

Introduction

The world's historical record traces various types of violence against children back to ancient civilization. Through the ages, reports of infanticide, child abandonment, malnourished and sexually abused children had attracted the interest of philanthropists and religious groups who aimed at protecting these children. Cruelty was not as a rule inflicted by the parents but was a widely spread phenomenon linked with poverty, child labour and the low value on children. Nevertheless, it was not but forty years ago that the issue attracted attention by the medical profession with the publication of H. Kempe et al. landmark paper on "The battered child syndrome", which opened the debate on willfully inflicted injuries of parents against their children.

Two commonly held beliefs have characterized the early history of child abuse (Corby, 2000). "Firstly, the notion that the further one goes back in history the worse the treatment of children; secondly, that it is only in recent times that societies such as ours have taken concerted steps to deal with the problem". There is no doubt that both trends existed. Children have been valued, nurtured and cared for while they have also been maltreated, abandoned and exploited.

The study of the history of childhood (Aries, 1962; De Mause, 1976) has proven that every society deals with the care of its children and has found ways of intervention into families in

order to protect them. Cultural beliefs and attitudes, economic circumstances and politics impinging on these societies have played a major role in these efforts.

From then until today, the search on the causation of child abuse has categorized theories into three main groups (Sweet & Resick, 1979):

1. Psychological theories: those that focus on the instinctive and psychological characteristics of those who abuse.
2. Social psychological theories: those that focus on the dynamics of the interaction between abuser, child and immediate environment.
3. Sociological perspectives: those that emphasize social and political conditions as the most important.

In spite of this categorization, the adoption of a single – cause explanation of child abuse as a phenomenon may be useful in understanding certain types of abuse (i.e. attachment theory and emotional rejection of infants), but is insufficient for the understanding of such a complex phenomenon.

Today, four decades after the clinical description of “the battered child syndrome”, the quantitative and qualitative study of child abuse has led to its characterization as a global problem whose solving requires a much better understanding of its occurrence in a range of settings, as well as of its causes and consequences in these same settings.

Culture and child maltreatment

In the last twenty years, the cultural approach to child abuse causality has been based on the contribution of anthropology (Korbin, 1977). Central to this is parenting behaviour, as culture helps define and shapes the generally accepted principles of child – rearing and care of children. Rules about acceptable parenting practices vary across cultures to the extent that a consensus of what is abusive or neglectful parental practice is difficult to agree upon (National Research Council, 1993).

Nevertheless, it appears that there is general agreement across many cultures that child abuse should not be allowed and virtual unanimity in this respect in the case of very hard disciplinary practices and sexual abuse (Bross et al., 2000).

Cross-cultural comparisons of child maltreatment, up to now, have focused on incidence and prevalence rates and intervention programs including child protection, family therapy, legal provisions and their use across countries. The lack of a functional definition to be used in cross-cultural research has resulted to little research. Finkelhor and Korbin (1988), have suggested a definition to be used internationally so that cross-cultural comparisons be allowed: “Child abuse is the portion of harm to children that results from human action that is proscribed, proximate and preventable.” The cultural value of children may entail both risk and/or protective factors.

In Europe, two contradictory views exist, sometimes balancing each other, other times not. One views the child as innocent, as *tabula rasa*, emphasizing environmental factors affecting human behaviour. The other considers the animal nature of the child requiring control and transformation (Agathonos-Georgopoulou, 1992).

The cross-cultural record has identified certain categories of children as being at increased risk for acts of omission or commission, within a specific cultural context. Such groups may in-

clude handicapped, illegitimate, orphaned, adopted or step children, children of the wrong sex for their parents, or even children whose personality traits and/or behaviour (e.g. passivity/aggressivity), are not valued by their family, community or culture.

For example, in societies with a strong male preference, girls are at higher risk for maltreatment or neglect (i.e. China). Nevertheless, an opposite trend on the same issue may be observed, as in Greece, where the high value on boys seems to lead to higher expectations from their behaviour and to harsher punishment by their mothers, regardless of age (Agathonos et al., 1982).

Further research into the impact of culture upon child rearing practices, in relation to inter-generational continuities in child up-bringing, has come up with interesting findings (Ferrari, 2002). The study aimed at assessing the relationship between a childhood history of abuse in a parent and the cultural beliefs and factors that an individual may subscribe to with current behaviours and attitudes. The hypothesis was that cultural factors would be more predictive of parenting behaviours and attitudes than ethnicity as a demographic variable. The survey population comprised 150 parents of Hispanic, African American and European American descent who completed the Conflict Tactics Scale, a Familism scale, a Machismo Scale, a Valuing Children Scale, the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire while also they rated vignettes on child maltreatment. The results of the study depict that a personal history of abuse in childhood is predictive of the use of both physical and verbal punishment, by mothers, but not for fathers. Contrary, fathers' but not mothers' parenting behaviours were predictable by cultural factors and beliefs. In addition, ethnicity, as a demographic variable continued to be a significant predictor of parenting behaviours and attitudes for all parents, after controlling for cultural factors. The author suggests that ethnicity, as a complex factor, needs further examination as to its content.

Another culturally related contributive factor to child maltreatment is social isolation. Maltreating parents have been described as having less or a poorer relationship with their families of origin (Zuravin & Greif, 1989), smaller peer networks (Starr, 1982), but also less contact and belongingness to social groups and organizations in the community, resulting in less or no access to community resources (Gracia & Musitu, 2003, Garbarino & Crouter, 1978, Vondra, 1990). The links between social isolation and limited social ties with an elevated risk for child maltreatment shows two trends (Belsky, 1993). On the one hand maltreating parents contribute to their social isolation and lack of social support because of their characteristics, while on the other social isolation, social impoverishment and deprivation increase the risk for family deterioration and malfunctioning.

Gracia and Musitu (2003), in their recent study with 670 non-abusive and 166 abusive families in both Spain and Colombia aimed at determining the differences between the two cultures in relation to variables of community social support and at investigating the relationship between community social support variables and child maltreatment across these two cultures. The study results have indicated that in both cultures abusive parents show lower levels of community integration, participation in community social activities and use of formal and informal organizations than adequately parenting adults. While the links between community social support and child maltreatment were found to be similar in both cultural contexts, differences were found in the pattern of community social support for the non-abusive groups.

Although contextual factors have been found to act as contributive to child maltreatment, a review of child maltreatment research (National Research Council, 1993), has proposed an ecological – developmental framework for the understanding of the phenomenon. Gracia and Musitu's work (2003), has further demonstrated that, within this ecological model, it is the

transaction of factors across all levels that furthers our understanding of the complex etiology of child maltreatment.

A consensus is evident that if we wish to further our understanding between culture and maltreatment efforts should be made “to unpack” culture, to promote the understanding of culture within its context and to enhance research on the scientific domain of child maltreatment and culture, and its links with child maltreatment. It is suggested that multiple methods be used in collaborative ways and that all work incorporates the cultural perspective in its design and methodology.

Another aspect under consideration is children’s position within culture and its links with the prevention of child maltreatment. As children not only contribute to the shaping of culture but are also recipients of culture, the re-orientation of their position in society as a result of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the reconsideration of child abuse as a social construct are inevitably attributing a high political priority to the rights of children and their violation.

Physical punishment of children: A cultural paradigm

Physical child abuse has been referred to as an extension of culturally accepted child rearing practices such as the physical punishment of children. The experience of harsh physical punishment teaches children that this may be a part of child rearing, which, in turn, it is highly likely, they use as a disciplinary method to their own children. A prevalence study of physical punishment of children in the US (Buntain-Rickless et al., 1994) and adult approval of such punishment, revealed that adult acceptance was predicted by whether they themselves had experienced punishment during childhood. These findings have been supported in a study of college students who were severely punished in their formative years, found to believe that physical punishment of children is appropriate (Kelder et al., 1991). The links between physical and verbal punishment are stressed in a Mexican study (Frias-Armenta 2002), in conjunction with both direct and indirect efforts on women’s behaviour and psychological functioning. Direct consequences such as depression, anxiety, alcohol consumption and antisocial behaviour were found to act as risk factors of child maltreatment in the next generation.

In Ferrari’s recent study (2002), it was predicted that the “ingredients” of ethnicity measured such as machismo, familism and valuing children, would be associated with the outcome variables of the parents’ use of physical punishment, reasoning and verbal punishment, of providing nurturance and of the parents’ severity in rating abuse and neglect in vignettes.

The study concludes that “differences in parental behaviours of disciplining, such as use of physical punishment, are as individualistic as parents themselves and cannot be considered abusive or benign without close examination of the entire family system, the child’s functioning and other parental behaviours, such as use of reasoning and nurturing behaviours which may serve to buffer the possible harmful effects of physical punishment”.

In Greece, the physical punishment of children has been the subject of a number of research studies since the 1970’s. Zarnari (1979), in a study of socialization patterns of 8 year old children, found that parental discipline is influenced by social class and sex variables.

Additional studies (Potamianou & Safilios-Rothchild, 1972, Vassiliou & Vassiliou, 1970), conclude that the three types of children’s behaviour which are regarded as inappropriate in the Greek family are opposition to parental authority, school failure and inappropriate social be-

haviour. The wide use of physical punishment in Greece among older children, was later identified by Paritsis et al. (1987), in a study of 13-15 year old children, 15% of which reported that they had been "severely spanked" by their parents within the last month. More recently, Bakoula et al. (1993), in a national cohort study of 8.158 seven year old children (6.8% of all Greek 7 year olds), found from self-answered questionnaires, that one in three children admitted having been spanked at least once a week and one in six, daily. Spanking was correlated positively with a number of behavioural problems among children.

The factors found to be associated with daily spanking were gender (boys), rural origin, low education of parents, father unskilled labourer, mother housewife, young parents, many siblings and "difficult" child. Similar were the findings of another Greek study among 6-11 year old children (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 1993), which suggested that more frequent physical punishment occurred in children (6-9 years). Furthermore, children who were systematically physically punished were found with a higher score in problematic behaviour and a lower score in social adjustment, compared with children who were not physically punished.

A sociological study on the use of physical punishment in the Greek family (Fereti & Stavriadaki, 1997), revealed a frequency for physical punishment rate as high as 65.5% among children of first and sixth grade of primary school. Boys were found to be twice as much at risk than girls, younger children (1st grade) three times as much than older children (6th grade), and children in families with more than one child twice as much than only children. Among mothers, 6.2% disclosed that their child suffered a light injury such as nose-bleeding or scratch while 1.8% disclosed a serious injury which needed stitching and/or hospitalization. An interesting finding in this study is that almost all parents believe that physical discipline is a useless method for bringing up children, which may have negative effects on the parent-child relationship, to make the child feel unwanted and fearful, to lead to the child's depression and psychological problems and to hamper the child's natural curiosity and mental development. Parents in this study spanked their children when they do something "contrary to the parent's warning or scolding", "tell lies", "use bad words", "damage something in the house" or "refuse to study".

Lastly, a study on attitudes, experiences and practices related to the physical punishment of children of a population of 423 Greek policemen 26-49 years, revealed a broad acceptance of spanking as a disciplinary method (Marangos et al., 1997). Two in three police officers, mostly men, agree with the statement that "spanking is needed every now and then". Most (64%) of 208 policemen (49%) who are parents, use physical punishment with their own children; although a practice of high frequency, it is less than what they experienced (88%), as children in their parental families. An interesting finding is that this decrease from one generation to the other relates to highest or lowest frequencies ("never": from 36% to 11,6%; "often" from 6,1% to 1%) whereas no changes were found in the case of extreme punishment (51%). Among the different methods of physical punishment used, an intergenerational decrease is observed in the case of harsh methods, i.e. slap on the face (from 42,7% to 13,6%); pulling ear or hair (from 33,8% to 20,5%), hitting with stick or belt (from 33% to 4,5%), pinching (from 8% to 3,8%) and kicking (from 3,2% to 0,8%), with the exception of milder methods such as "spanking on the bottom", where an increase is observed from one generation to the other from 62% to 75%.

A crossroads towards the prevention of child maltreatment

The prevention of child maltreatment is at a fortuitous crossroads of two major movements affecting the quality of life of children worldwide and the ways policy makers and professionals approach the subject of violence in the family, as a phenomenon.

One is obviously the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), one of the most widely ratified of all the international treaties and conventions, whose impact, though, in protecting children around the world from maltreatment of all types, has yet fallen short of everyone's expectations. Although Article 19 calls for legislative, administrative, social and educational actions to protect children from all forms of violence including abuse and neglect, there are no specific data on the results of its implementation since no global study has tried specifically to determine the impact of the Convention on the prevention of abuse. Nevertheless, the CRC has brought forward the new image of children, from objects of protection to subjects of special rights, leading to the social and political visibility of children assuming the role of social actors and to the visibility of childhood as a social phenomenon (Agathonos-Georgopoulou, 1999). As childhood is increasingly becoming a topic of political debate, involving public opinion, two opposite trends are being observed. On the one hand, activists are consciously engaged in the deconstruction and reconstruction of childhood, by acknowledging and reinforcing children's strategies and by identifying and challenging their powerlessness, in an effort to allow children more access to social, economic and political resources (Kitzinger, 1997). On the other, the various efforts to make childhood more visible on the political but also the research agenda, are characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty (Agathonos-Georgopoulou, 1999). Children's participation in the home, the school, the community and its links to the promotion of healthy citizenry is acting as a snow-ball, which, in conjunction with the fastly growing political debate on children's rights, is fastly transforming the CRC from a document to an instrument for every day use.

The other major movement is the new approach to violence as a public health issue, promoted by the World Health Organisation (2002). Since the early 1980's, the field of public health has committed itself in studying and in understanding the roots of violence and in preventing its occurrence. Social, economic, political and cultural conditions as well as attitudes and behaviours which contribute to violence, can be reduced and, therefore, violence be prevented in the same way that public health efforts have prevented and reduced pregnancy – related complications, infectious diseases, workplace injuries and illnesses resulting from contaminated food and water in many parts of the world (W.H.O., 2002).

The public health approach is interdisciplinary and science based, drawing upon knowledge from many disciplines, while also emphasizing collective action so that safe and healthy communities are created around the world.

The World Health Organisation (1999) has recently defined child abuse or maltreatment as "all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity, in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power".

The prevention of child abuse as a public health problem is based on an integrated multi-sectoral approach whose partners includes Policy Makers, the Health Sector (Physical and Mental Health), the Social Sector (including Family Welfare Services), the Education Sector (formal and informal), the Mass Media, the Legal Sector (including Law Enforcement),

NGO's and Associations and the Community. This approach moves along two axes: one is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child while the other is Public Health. The model follows the articles of the CRC in connection with the following public health stages: Definition, Prevention, Training, Data Collection, Monitoring, Evaluation, Response Intervention.

This integrated multisectoral mobilization has been successfully implemented in the issue of smoking, and the effects of its toxicity on the individual, which can be used as a useful analogy to the prevention of child abuse which involves an emotionally and socially toxic environment (Garbarino, 1996). In the US, the fight against smoking succeeded on the basis "of a systematic, coordinated assault on a set of values, on a set of beliefs and on a set of assumptions about what rights people possessed". Masses of data documented the risk of smoking to health and well-being; continuous campaigns communicated the data to the population, while consistent advocacy targeted at all political levels – local, state and national.

The results have been impressive in the US while permeating the rest of the western world, as "smokers gradually constitute smaller and smaller minority groups whose social position is increasingly marginal". Garbarino (1996), advocates a parallel situation which has been occurring with child abuse prevention. In this, he uses the example of the shifting of attitudes, beliefs and practices against hitting children. Not only overall societal and parental attitudes are changing but also changes are observed in the consciousness of children.

The reconstruction of childhood through the CRC and children's new position as participants in matters affecting them, in connection with the remarkable changes of what constitutes "personal" or "private" within the family, are already acting as buffers to risk factors associated with child maltreatment.

This evolution in child abuse prevention poses a great challenge for all, as our efforts to contradict the popular belief that childrearing is a private matter, should be as persistent, well-coordinated and as politically strong as those against the multiply toxic influence of tobacco and the profits of tobacco companies worldwide.

The synergies developing between the public health and the child rights approach, in conjunction with their application within the cultural milieu, may act as a double-edged knife. We should therefore, be persisting on prioritizing children's rights, thus emphasizing similarities across cultures in child health, development and children's participatory position in society, while also identifying cultural differences. This synergistic model should be soundly based on an equal playing field worldwide, in which children are the protagonists.

References

- AGATHONOS-GEORGOPOULOU, H. (1992). Cross-cultural perspectives in child abuse and neglect. *Child Abuse Review*, 1, 80-88.
- AGATHONOS-GEORGOPOULOU, H. (1999). Promoting healthy families and children: What do children need from a physical, social and psychological view point? *First Meeting on Strategies for Child Protection, Report on a WHO Meeting*. Padua, Italy 29-31 October 1998, EUR/ICP/FMLY 010301.
- AGATHONOS, H., STATHACOPOULOU, N., ADAM, H., & NAKOU, S. (1982). Child abuse and neglect in Greece: Sociomedical aspects. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 6, 307-11.
- ARIES, P. (1962). *Centuries of childhood*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- BAKOULA, C., KAVADIAS, G., & MATSANIOTIS, N. (1993). Contradictions in the Greek family related to their children's upbringing. *Paper presented at the 31st Panhellenic Pediatric Conference, June 1993.*
- BELSKY, J. (1993). Etiology of child maltreatment: A developmental – ecological analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 114*, 413-434.
- BROSS, D.C. et al. (2000). *World perspectives on child abuse: The fourth international resource book*. Denver, CO: Kempe Children's Center, University of Colorado School of Medicine.
- BUCHANAN, A. (1999). The transmission of child abuse. *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare, 4*, 77-84.
- BUNTAIN-RICKLESS, J.J., KEMPER, K.J., BELL, M., & BABONIS, T. (1994). Punishment: what predicts adult approval. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 18*, 945-955.
- CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD (1989). New York: United Nations.
- CORBY, B. (2000). *Child abuse: Towards a knowledge base (2nd edition)*. Open University Press, Independent International Publisher.
- DE MAUSE, L. (Ed.) (1976). *The history of childhood*. London: Souvenir Press.
- FERETI, I., & STAVRIANAKI, M. (1997). The use of physical punishment in the Greek family: Selected sociodemographic aspects. *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare, 2*, 206-216.
- FERRARI, A.M. (2002). The impact of culture upon child rearing practices and definitions of maltreatment. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 26*, 793-813.
- FINKELHOR, D., & KORBIN, J. (1988). Child abuse as an international issue. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 12*, 3-24.
- FRIAS-ARMENTA, M. (2002). Long-term effects of child punishment on Mexican women: A structural model. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 26*, 371-386.
- GARBARINO, J. (1996). CAN reflections on 20 years of searching: Invited commentary. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 20*, 157-160.
- GARBARINO, J., & CROUTER, A.C. (1978). Defining the community context of parent child relations. *Child Development, 49*, 604-616.
- GELLES, R.J., & LOSEKE, D.R. (Eds.) (1993). *Current controversies on family violence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- GRACIA, E., & MUSITU, G. (2003). Social isolation from communities and child maltreatment: A cross-cultural comparison. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 27*, 153-168.
- KAUFMAN, J., & ZIGLER, E. (1989). The intergenerational transmission of child abuse. In D. CICCHETTI & V. CARLSON (Eds.), *Child Maltreatment. Theory and research on the causes and consequences of child abuse and neglect* (pp. 129-150). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- KELDER, L.R., NCNAMARA, J.R., CARLSON, B., & LYNN, S.J. (1991). Perceptions of physical punishment: The relation to childhood and adolescent experiences. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 6*, 432-445.
- KEMPE, C.H., SILVERMAN, F., DROEGMUELLER, W., & SILVER, H. (1962). The battered child syndrome. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 181*, 17-24.
- KITZINGER, J. (1997). Who are you kidding/Children, power, and the struggle against sexual abuse. In A. JAMES & A. PROUT (Eds.), *Constructing and reconstructing childhood*. Falmer Press.
- KORBIN, J. (1977). Anthropological contributions to the study of child abuse and neglect. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 1*, 7-24.
- KORBIN, J.E. (2002). Culture and child maltreatment: Cultural competence and beyond. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 26*, 637-644.
- KRUG, E.G., DAHLBERG, L.L., MERCY, J.A., ZWI, A.B., & LOZANO, R. (Eds.) (2002). *World Report on Violence and Health*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- MARANGOS, C., AGATHONOS, H., & NOVA, C. (1997). Physical discipline of children: Attitudes, experiences and practices among policemen. *Bulletin, A' Pediatric Athens University Clinic, 443*, 143-149.
- MOTTI-STEFANIDI, F., RICHARDSON, C., & TSIAANTIS, J. (1993). The relationship between child rearing practices and various psychosocial factors among primary school children. *Eklogi: Journal of Social Work and Welfare, 98*, 159-169 (in Greek).

- NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL (1993). *Understanding child abuse and neglect*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Science Press.
- PARITSIS, N., PALLIS, D.J., LYKETSOS, E., PHYLACTOU, C., SARAFIDOU, E., & VRACHNI, F. (1987). School delinquent and deviant behaviour in adolescence: The role of children's personality and attitudes. *Paper presented at the First European Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, April, Rhodes*.
- POTAMIANOU, A., & SAFILIOS-ROTHCHILD, F. (1972). Trends in discipline in the Greek family. *Human Relations, 24*, 387-395.
- STARR, R.H. Jr. (1982). A research based approach to the prediction of child abuse. In H.R. STRARR Jr. (Ed.), *Child abuse prediction: Policy implications* (pp. 12-37). Cambridge: M.A. Ballinger.
- SWEET, J., & RESICK, P. (1979). The maltreatment of children: A review of theories and research. *Journal of Social Issues, 35*, 40-59.
- VASSILIOU, G., & VASSILIOU, V. (1970). On aspects of child rearing in Greece. In E. ANTHONY & C. KOUPERNIK (Eds.), *The child in its family*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- VONDRA, J.I. (1990). The community context of child abuse. *Marriage and Family Review, 15*, 19-38.
- WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION (1999). *Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention, Geneva, 29-31 March, WHO/HSC/PVI/99.1*.
- ZARNARI, O. (1979). Patterns of children's socialization in the Greek family. *Eklogi, D.*, 3-11 (in Greek).
- ZURAVIN, S.J., & GREIF, G.L. (1989). Normative and child maltreating AFDC mothers. *Social Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work, 74*, 76-84.

Author note

Helen Agathonos-Georgopoulou, Ph.D.

Institute of Child Health

Department of Family Relations – Centre for the Study Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect

7 Fokidos

11526 Athens

Greece

agatinst@otenet.gr