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Child abuse in South Africa: an examination of how child abuse and neglect are defined

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this study was to explore which of 17 categories of child maltreatment South Africans evaluated as most serious and to determine if those working with abuse and neglect evaluated abuse and neglect differently from those who did not.

Method: A revised version of Giovannoni and Becerra's [Giovannoni, J., & Becerra, R. (1979). *Defining child abuse*. New York: The Free Press] questionnaire exploring the definition of abuse and neglect was completed by 181 residents of Cape Town, South Africa. The new form had 17 categories of child maltreatment, including 4 categories of societal abuse. Respondents were social workers ($n = 57$), human service workers ($n = 42$), laypersons ($n = 65$), and members of the child protection unit of the South African Police ($n = 18$). ANOVA was used to compare the groups' responses. When significant differences among groups were found, a Bonferroni post hoc test was run to determine differences between groups.

Results: The respondents ranked sexual abuse and child prostitution as most serious and housing and child labor as least serious of the 17 categories. There was a significant difference ($p \leq .01$) between groups on nine categories. When post hoc tests were run, differences were found for eight categories with laypersons generally evaluating categories as significantly more serious than social workers.

Conclusions: Reasons for the order of the rankings are discussed, but concern remains that differences in the evaluation of child maltreatment will lead to difficulty in implementing a protocol for identifying and responding to incidents of abuse and neglect.

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Introduction

Although child abuse has occurred throughout history, it is only recently that it has been defined as a societal problem (Pfohl, 1977), and even more recently that those working in child maltreatment have begun to compare how abuse and neglect is constructed in countries with diverse cultures. Sternberg (1993) suggests that because the definition of abuse influences the labeling of interaction between parents and children, it is intricately tied to culture. Gough (1996) takes a broader perspective, pointing out that the term abuse is particularly dependent upon ideas of individual rights and the interaction between people and groups within a society. Finkelhor and Korbin (1988) provided one of the first definitions of abuse and neglect broad enough to be responsive to differences in cultural values, norms, and beliefs. They recognized that not all maltreatment is abuse and defined child maltreatment as “the portion of harm to children that results from human action that is proscribed, proximate and preventable” (p. 4). This definition distinguishes child maltreatment from other social, economic, and health problems facing children and is flexible enough to move beyond Western definitions of child maltreatment and examine how it occurs in other cultures. But as Korbin (1991, p. 68) points out, there are three levels used in formulating culturally appropriate definitions of child maltreatment: (1) cultural differences in childrearing practices and beliefs, (2) idiosyncratic departure from one’s cultural continuum of acceptable behavior, and (3) societal harm to children. While the first two are somewhat easy to reconcile within cultural differences, the third creates more problems, particularly in countries that have not provided resources to families and children.

There have been many theoretical explanations for child abuse and neglect (Tzeng, Jackson, & Karlson, 1991) based on experiences in the United States and the United Kingdom, but most explanations focus on parent-child or family interactions. An exception is David Gil (1970) and others who see child abuse as a social problem. Gil includes poor housing, inadequate economic support for families, and unsafe communities as abuse. Segal (1992) takes a slightly different approach and contrasts the definition of child maltreatment in the United States and its focus on family interactions with the definition of child maltreatment in India, which does not differentiate between familial abuse and societal abuse. She defines child labor, child prostitution, child marriage, and child beggary, which were legal in India, as societal abuse.

Perhaps the primary dilemma facing those attempting to provide a definition of maltreatment appropriate for cross-cultural use is the need to find a balance between using one country’s description, which most likely will ignore others’ cultural beliefs and practices, and taking a stance of extreme cultural relativism. The latter may be used to justify a lesser standard of care for some children (Korbin, 1991). As a response to this dilemma, Finkelhor and Korbin (1988) have identified six dimensions of child maltreatment that appear to influence the application of the notion of child abuse in an international framework. For an act to be maltreatment, it must be (1) intentional; (2) socially censured in the locale in which it has occurred; (3) abusive according to international consensus; (4) perpetrated by an individual, although governmental, economic, and religious actions may also constitute child abuse; (5) harm children rather than everyone in the society; and (6) be perpetrated against a child who is considered a person by that society.

One of the problems with this definition is that governmental acts of neglect of select groups in a society may not be socially censured and still may result in maltreatment of large numbers of children. For example, in South Africa, many children of color were excluded from any governmental programs. Black African children, in particular, were excluded because resources were a “tribal matter.”

Gough (1996) provides a somewhat different approach to the definition of abuse and neglect. He suggests that there has been a broadening of the definition to allow greater sensitivity to differences in

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