



## Measurement of emotional/psychological child maltreatment: A review<sup>☆</sup>

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 25 November 2010

Received in revised form 31 March 2011

Accepted 13 April 2011

Available online 20 October 2011

#### Keywords:

Psychological/emotional maltreatment

Psychological/emotional abuse and neglect

Psychometric properties

Reliability

Validity

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Emotional/psychological child maltreatment (ECM) is a major public health problem with serious consequences including emotional and behavioral problems. Nevertheless, ECM is an understudied area.

**Objectives:** The aims of this review are to identify measures of ECM and to evaluate their psychometric properties and utilities. We provide a summary of ECM measures that have been tested for their reliability and validity, evaluate the quality of these assessments and suggest directions for future research.

**Methods:** We searched PsycINFO and Medline databases from 2000 to 2010 in addition to a hand search of retrieved references; 2344 were identified and the abstracts reviewed independently by two authors to identify relevant articles. Using pre-established criteria, 144 of those articles were selected and reviewed in full to assess whether the instruments included a separate measure of ECM and its psychometric properties.

**Results:** Forty-five articles examining 33 measures met the inclusion criteria and were selected for further review. The majority of measures demonstrated acceptable reliability; fewer measures had evaluated one or more types of validity.

**Conclusion:** Both reliability and validity testing are required in order to establish more accurate measures of ECM.

**Practice implications:** Reliable and valid measures are necessary to enhance our limited knowledge about the distribution, determinants and consequences of ECM.

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### Introduction

During the last few decades, both practitioners and researchers have increased their awareness about the extent of emotional/psychological child maltreatment (ECM), its risk factors, and consequences (Brassard, Hart, & Hardy, 1993; Kairys & Johnson, 2002). ECM is often defined as both acts of omission (emotional neglect) and commission (emotional abuse). The true incidence of ECM is unknown and the estimates available depend on reporting source, methodology and definitions (e.g., abuse combined with neglect or considered separately). However, a study using a random probability sample of 18–24 year olds from the United Kingdom found that six percent of the respondents had experienced emotional abuse, using stringent criteria (May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005). An American population-based incidence study found an emotional abuse rate of

<sup>☆</sup> This research was supported in part by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research of Gender and Health and Institute of Neuroscience Mental health and Addictions to PreVAiL (Centre for Research Development in Gender, Mental Health and Violence across the Lifespan). Dr. MacMillan holds the David R. (Dan) Offord Chair in Child Studies and is funded by the Institute of Gender and Health through the CIHR Centres for Research Development.

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103 per 1000 among 2–17 year olds (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005). In contrast, official child protection data report lower estimates, although there have been increases in recent years. The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect provides estimates of substantiated ECM for 1998 (0.86 per 1000 children) and for 2003 (3.23 per 1000 children) (Trocmé et al., 2005). Increases have also been noted in Australian child protection data for emotional abuse (Fluke et al., 2008). The reason for this increase in substantiations is unknown but greater awareness may play a role.

Although ECM is common, it has received less research attention than physical and sexual abuse and exposure to domestic violence (Teicher, Samson, Polcari, & McGreenery, 2006). This could be due to under-reporting and/or methodological challenges related to ambiguous definitions and difficulty measuring actions that constitute ECM. Perhaps misconceptions regarding seriousness have also led to less attention. The challenge of delineating emotional/psychological maltreatment from co-occurring types of abuse and neglect may also influence reporting (Brassard et al., 1993; Gracia, 1995; Hart, Brassard, & Karlson, 1996; Hovdestad, Tonmyr, Hubka, & De Marco, 2005).

Most parents, regardless of sociodemographic status, have used emotionally aggressive discipline at some time (Straus & Field, 2003). At the family level, risk indicators include disruptions in interpersonal relationships combined with additional stressors such as financial and mental health problems (Doyle, 1997). At the child level, older children appear to experience more emotionally abusive behavior than infants (Straus & Field, 2003). Children who are intellectually and/or emotionally disabled or socially isolated are also more vulnerable (Doyle, 1997). Some studies did not separate risk indicators for specific types of maltreatment or only used ECM as a control variable (Bagley & Mallick, 2000).

Although ECM does not result in observable physical findings (except in severe cases where growth is affected), it is associated with impairment in a broad range of behavioral, emotional and social problems (Bremner, Vermetten, & Mazure, 2000; Hart, Binggeli, & Brassard, 1998; Hart et al., 1996; Solomon & Serres, 1999; Teicher et al., 2006; Vissing, Straus, Gelles, & Harrop, 1991). It has also been suggested that the outcomes of ECM may be more serious in combination with other types of maltreatment (Ney, Fung, & Wickett, 1994). However, it is difficult to identify a threshold for what constitutes emotionally abusive or neglectful behaviors or acts, which makes it challenging to examine impairment that is specifically associated with ECM.

To better capture the extent of ECM and ultimately to develop approaches to reduce it, several measures have been developed. The objectives of this article are:

- to identify the measures of ECM that have been tested for their reliability and validity;
- to evaluate the quality of this assessment;
- to suggest directions for future research into the development of ECM measures.

## Methods

We developed a search strategy based on pre-established criteria in consultation with an information specialist, and the members of the Research-Working Group of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS). The CIS is a component of the Public Health Agency of Canada's child maltreatment surveillance program. Three searches were performed using PsycINFO and Medline databases from 2000 to 2010 (for a and b): (a) a search involving various combinations of the following key words: child, adolescent, emotional maltreatment, emotional abuse, emotional neglect, psychological maltreatment or aggression, verbal abuse or aggression, care and antipathy combined with the following (measurement based) keywords: validity, statistical validity, rating scale, measurement, construction, test, reliability, inter-rater, internal consistency, factor structure, psychometric, screening and instruments; (b) a search by identified key authors, names of measures known to measure ECM, and other potential sources of information in combination with psychometric properties key words; and (c) using references from the identified articles. This multiple strategies yielded 2344 citations.

One hundred and forty-four of those articles were selected based on independent review of titles and abstracts and further assessed in full by two authors (LT and JD). Those articles that provided results from original research studies about the psychometric properties of an instrument assessing ECM were included. This assessment yielded forty-five articles that all tested reliability and/or validity of contemporaneous or retrospective ECM measures (abuse and/or neglect) and were thus included in our results.

We excluded studies pertaining solely to the following: risk factors for and outcomes of ECM, measurements of parents' opinions or their potential to abuse, adolescents' experiences of dating violence, exposure to domestic and community violence, and measurement of maltreating acts by non-adult perpetrators (e.g., bullying by peers or siblings). We focus on those studies that include the most complete assessment of an instrument's psychometric properties, so do not include studies of measures that only include information about the development of measures such as factor analysis or where only internal consistency or face validity data are provided. For the purpose of this paper, the term ECM will be used unless referring to measures or scales which use other terms to denote the same concept.

The two psychometric properties of the studies that were the main focus of the assessment included reliability and validity. Reliability refers to consistency of the measure across time, rater, and occasion (Streiner & Norman, 2008) i.e., internal consistency (IC), test–retest reliability (TRT) and inter-rater reliability (IR). IC is based on single administration and represents “the average of the correlation among all the items in the measure” (Streiner & Norman, 2008, p. 8). It is calculated using Cronbach's alpha. Stability of measures over time and across raters is measured by TRT, defined as observation conducted on two occasions separated by a time interval. Further, IR is defined as a “degree of agreement

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