



# Propensity to perpetrate abusive behaviors: Internet survey of the role of gender, childhood maltreatment, and perception of maltreatment in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

This article reports on propensity to perpetrate abusive behaviors and examines the role of gender, childhood maltreatment, and perception of abusive behaviors on the propensity. Findings suggest that propensity to perpetrate abusive behaviors cuts across all types of maltreatment (i.e., physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, child neglect, and child labor). Although abusive behavior with high propensity for perpetration includes corporal punishment, propensity to perpetrate abusive behaviors differed by gender. Men were more likely than women to indicate propensity to perpetrate abusive behaviors. Those who perceived behaviors as not abusive, as well as those who reported childhood experience of abusive behaviors, were more likely to intend to perpetrate abusive behaviors. Although childhood experience of sexual abuse was related to perpetration of sexual abuse, history of perpetrating sexual abuse comprised the largest effect size of the propensities to perpetrate abusive behaviors. Implications of findings for policy, practice, and services are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on risk factors for child maltreatment has consistently suggested that child, parental, environmental, and sociodemographic factors influence perpetration of child maltreatment (Begle, Dumas, & Hanson, 2010; Belsky, 1993; Berger, 2005; Connelly & Straus, 1992; Ertem, Leventhal, & Dobbs, 2000; Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 1983; Rodriguez, 2008; Rodriguez & Eden, 2007). Among these factors, parental perception and childhood maltreatment are valuable predictors of child maltreatment (Bartlett & Easterbrooks, 2012; Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Dolezal & Carballo-Dieguez, 2002; Kim, 2009; Markward, Dozier, Hooks, & Markward, 2000; Rodriguez & Price, 2004). Among the most enduring variables for predicting maltreatment, perception and childhood maltreatment are particularly important because how individuals perceive childhood experience of maltreatment may influence their propensity to perpetrate maltreatment. Yet, empirical knowledge connecting propensity to perception and childhood maltreatment is sparse. The sparseness is particularly pronounced in developing regions, especially Nigeria. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine propensity to perpetrate abusive behaviors in Nigeria and determine the role of gender, childhood maltreatment, and perception on the propensity.

## 2. Culture and maltreatment in Nigeria

Defining maltreatment in Nigeria is particularly challenging given the complex socio-cultural and religious conditions that prevent precise definition of abusive behaviors. Historically, attempts to define maltreatment include efforts to integrate the guidelines of Convention of the Rights of the Child to curb harmful cultural practices against vulnerable children. Nevertheless, abusive behaviors against children are common in Nigeria. Their prevalence is described in recent reports by African Child Policy Forum (ACPF, 2011) that identified the various forms of abusive behaviors against children including beating (90%), hitting (84%), kicking (55%), denial of food (51%), being shouted at or glared at (85%), being insulted (84%), being embarrassed in front of others (73%), and witnessing severe beating/hitting (62%). The prevalence identified by the report also include being touched or fondled in private parts (between 38% and 52%) and being forced to engage in sexual intercourse or being raped (40%). A recent cross-sectional study in a region in Nigeria also suggests regular occurrence of maltreatment including physical abuse (47.5%), sexual abuse (26.2%), psychological abuse (41.5%), physical neglect (44.8%), medical care neglect (28.4%), intentional drugging (10.9%), educational neglect (19.7%), and abandonment (lack of supervision) (24%) (Jekayinfa & Olawepo, 2010).

To understand prevalence of abusive behaviors in Nigeria requires an understanding of socio-cultural practices that gave rise to it. Common factors associated with abusive behaviors include poverty, religious practices and beliefs, and general misconceptions about human behavior and development. Due to poverty, some children are forced to fend for themselves in the streets (Asante, 1999; Mbakogu, 2004;

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Obioha, 2009) and others become economic means of livelihood for their parents through hawking of food and begging for alms on the streets. Some become domestic servants for others and others are forced to perform tedious household responsibilities for prolonged hours. Abusive behaviors are particularly severe when children are disabled or branded or stigmatized as witches (Secker, 2013; Uzuegbu, 2010). Some abusive behaviors, such as genital mutilation, child trafficking and prostitution, child betrothal and early marriage, are particularly targeted at female children. For example, a study by Mandara (2004) found 34% of women to be genitally mutilated and another study suggests that children often develop complications from the abusive behavior (Osifo & Egbuomwan, 2009).

Although some of the abusive cultural practices are more pronounced in northern parts of the country than the southern parts, the propensity for them increases significantly when the parents are poor and lack formal education. The propensity also depends on the gender of the parents or whether the parents live in rural or urban centers. For example, in a patriarchal society like Nigeria, the responsibility of men as the breadwinner and disciplinarian predisposes men to perpetrate abusive behaviors, especially given the fact that such perpetration is socially sanctioned. In addition, propensity for abusive behaviors increases significantly when the child's biological parents are deceased, separated, divorced, or when the child comes from a polygamous home. The family size and position of the child in the family also determines the extent at which the child will experience abusive behaviors.

The gender status of the child also increases the likelihood of experiencing abusive behaviors: culturally, girls are more susceptible to experiencing abusive behaviors than boys. In addition, propensity for experiencing abusive behaviors depends on the religious background of the parents. Because perpetration of abusive behaviors is influenced by parental adherence to certain religious values and beliefs that sanction the abusive behaviors, the propensity of children to experience abusive behaviors may be influenced by religious background of the parents. Thus, propensity for acceptance, support, experience, perception, or perpetration of abusive behaviors varies by cultural and religious background and characteristics of children and parents.

### 3. Perception of child maltreatment

One might reasonably assume that considerable work has been done on perception of child maltreatment. However, the majority of research relates to the influence of perception on identification, reporting, and investigation of maltreatment, as well as how it differs across sociodemographic factors (Ashton, 2001, 2004; Bostrom, 2003; Christopherson, 1996; Kiong, Elliot, & Tan, 1996; Portwood, Grady, & Dutton, 2000; Price et al., 2001; Segal & Iwai, 2004; Shanalingigwa, 2009; Smith, 2006, 2010). Although perception of childhood history of maltreatment has been related to propensity for maltreatment (Rodriguez & Price, 2004), some studies indicate that respondents perceived maltreatment experience differently than one would have expected. For example, respondents rated corporal punishment (Robertson, 2007) and perceived childhood experience of corporal punishment as appropriate methods of discipline (Irfan & Cowburn, 2004). Those who described childhood experience of sexual abuse did not perceive the experience as abusive (Dolezal & Carballo-Diequez, 2002). Yet, little empirical knowledge exists about the influence of such perception on propensity to perpetrate maltreatment.

### 4. Childhood maltreatment

Unlike perception of maltreatment, childhood maltreatment is generally examined in describing maltreatment perpetration. Childhood maltreatment is common among adults; the prevalence rate has been reported to be as low as 12% and as high as 73% across regions (Festinger & Baker, 2010; Figueiredo et al., 2004; Nuttall & Jackson,

1994; Perry, DiLillo, & Peugh, 2007; Pooler, Siebert, Faul, & Huber, 2008; Way, VanDeusen, Martin, Applegate, & Jandle, 2004). The mechanism by which childhood maltreatment translates into maltreatment perpetration is a complex one, which has been generally explained through its impacts on physical and mental well-being (Sachs-Ericsson, Kendall-Tackett, & Hernandez, 2007).

Childhood maltreatment has adverse effects on social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health functioning of adults to the extent that the experience constitutes potential risks for maltreatment perpetration, including harmful and deadly behaviors against self (Braquehais, Oquendo, Baca-Garcia, & Sher, 2010; Briere & Elliott, 2003; Çiğdem & Hatice, 2012; Dennerstein, Guthrie, & Alford, 2004; Dube et al., 2005; Friedman et al., 2011; Gorske, Larkby, Daley, Yenerall, & Morrow, 2006; Greenfield, Lee, Friedman, & Springer, 2011; Lalor & McElvaney, 2010; McGrath, Nilsen, & Kerley, 2011; Meyerson, Longa, Miranda, & Marx, 2002; Rich, Gidycz, Warkentin, Lohc, & Weiland, 2005; Sachs-Ericsson et al., 2010; Seifert, Polusny, & Murdoch, 2011; Swogger, Conner, Walsh, & Maisto, 2011; Vranceanu, Hobfoll, & Johnson, 2007). For example, childhood maltreatment damages personality and behaviors to the extent that victims face risks of revictimization, self-victimization, and victimization of others (Brodsky & Stanley, 2008; Grauerholz, 2000; Hall, Sachs, & Rayens, 1998; Joiner et al., 2007; Lalor & McElvaney, 2010; Lansford et al., 2007; Rich et al., 2005; Sachs-Ericsson, Verona, Joiner, & Preacher, 2006). It should therefore be expected that adjustment deficits created by childhood maltreatment would have negative impacts on adults' child-rearing capabilities.

### 5. Intergenerational maltreatment

Obviously, effects of childhood maltreatment on maltreatment perpetration can be explained through its intergenerational influence on adult behaviors such that adults who reported childhood history of maltreatment would be more likely to perpetrate abusive behaviors against their children (Bartlett & Easterbrooks, 2012; Dixon et al., 2005; Ertem et al., 2000; Kim, 2009; Markward et al., 2000; Newcomb & Locke, 2001; Pears & Capaldi, 2001). For example, a recent meta-analysis of studies found childhood history of sexual abuse to be related to propensity to perpetrate sexual abuse (Whitaker et al., 2008). Potential of childhood maltreatment resulting in maltreatment of children particularly increases when both parents experienced abusive behaviors during childhood (Pears & Capaldi, 2001).

It is obviously true that not everyone who experienced childhood maltreatment will grow up to maltreat their children during adulthood, as it may be reasonable to expect that childhood maltreatment would have differential effects on adult behaviors in terms of gender, nature, and types of maltreatment perpetrated during adulthood. For example, childhood history of sexual abuse has been associated with perpetration of multiple types of abuse (Robboy & Anderson, 2011), such as sexual abuse and physical abuse (Hall et al., 1998). It has been shown that experience of emotional and physical abuse and child neglect differ by gender. Men scored higher than women in measures of childhood experience of maltreatment (Çiğdem & Hatice, 2012; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996) and women were more likely than men to disclose childhood experience of sexual abuse (Stoltenborgh, van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011).

Notwithstanding the impacts of childhood maltreatment on adjustment difficulties, the mechanism by which childhood experience is translated into maltreatment perpetration remains largely unknown. For example, it is unknown whether childhood victims of abusive behaviors perceive the behaviors as abusive and whether such perception or lack thereof was instrumental to perpetration of abusive behaviors on their children. It also is largely unknown whether those who perceive childhood maltreatment as abusive are more likely to perpetrate abusive behaviors on their children or whether their lack of perception thereof would be instrumental in repeating the abusive behaviors on their children. Knowledge generated about

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