



Childhood maltreatment in South Korea: Retrospective study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study explored the prevalence of childhood maltreatment in South Korea using the retrospective version of ICAST and the associations between perceptions of abuse experienced during childhood and recent interpersonal problems and depression.

Methods: 539 young persons, aged 18–24 years, from various universities, work places, and clinical settings participated in a study using the ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool-Retrospective Version (ICAST-R), the short form of the Korean-Inventory of Interpersonal Problems Circumplex Scale (KIIP-SC), and the Korean version of the Beck Depression Inventory (K-BDI).

Results: While males reported more physical abuse, females reported being exposed to more emotional or sexual abuse. The proportion of reported extra-familial or peer abuse was relatively high. Interpersonal problems and depression were significantly high for those who experienced all types of abuse during childhood. Perception of physical abuse as reasonable/justified discipline affected interpersonal problems and perception of emotional abuse when compared to peers affected interpersonal problems and depression. Unlike previous studies, this study identified more depressive symptoms reported with disclosure of sexual abuse.

Practice implications: These findings highlight the importance of understanding how one perceives maltreatment. Perceiving an abusive act as a justifiable disciplinary method may affect reporting as well as longer term consequences for the victim. A wide range of perpetrators and different settings in which maltreatment may occur must be considered as influencing these perceptions. This study contributed to the determination of validity of the ICAST-R for use in wider population surveys.

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Introduction

Violence against children has long been recognized as a pervasive social problem all around the world, and South Korea is no exception. The tremendous scope and level of violence against children were verified in the UN Violence Study (Pinheiro, 2006). Tolerance and cultural sanctions of violence against children, Eastern and Western, have continued, and this has influenced the public's acceptance of violence against children (Gabarino, 1996; Lansford et al., 2005; Park, 2010; Tang, 2006; Whipple & Richey, 1997).

Many studies have been conducted in Korea exploring the state of child maltreatment since the late 1990s (Kim, 2002; Kim & Cho, 1998; Kim & Lee, 2009; Kim et al., 2003; Korean Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, 2000; Korean Ministry of Gender Equality, 2008; Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2000; Lee, 2006a, b; Lee et al., 2000). Lack of, and discrepancies in, definitions to identify child abuse have hindered obtaining accurate data on the exact scope and

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prevalence of child abuse (Kim, Lee, & Song, 2009; Park, 1999; Seo, 2001). This undoubtedly contributed to difficulties in establishing a targeted policy for the prevention and treatment of child abuse. The need for an objective criterion to assess and evaluate the level of child abuse was raised in previous research (Korean Ministry of Gender Equality, 2008; Lee & Chang, 2004).

The International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) developed the ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool (ICAST) that assesses the level of violence against children in accordance with the UN Study on Violence Against Children (Pinheiro, 2006). Three versions of ICAST were developed: ICAST-Parent (P), ICAST-Child (C), and ICAST-Retrospective (R). (For detailed information regarding all three versions, see 2009 November Issue of *Child Abuse & Neglect*). ICAST addressed the issue of definitions by developing this globally applicable tool through a Delphi Study process which involved professionals from around the world, including non-English speaking regions (ISPCAN, n.d.).

The Korean National Child Protection Agency, in a review of the state of child abuse in Korea, spanning over a 10-year period, found that children also experienced abuse inflicted by siblings. This study reported an increase in abuse by extra-familial members from 4.9% in 2001 to 9.4% in 2010, and abuse by siblings recorded 0.2% of all reported abuse cases (Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2010). The gradually increasing number of studies on peer and school or community-related violence highlighted the need for expanding the scope of perpetrators to more thoroughly encompass cases of violence against children (Amber, 1994; Chung, Park, & Ku, 2006; Shin, 2006; Sperry & Gilbert, 2005).

Earlier studies revealed that acceptance of violence mitigated the sequelae of childhood abuse (Lansford et al., 2005; Lansford, Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2004; Mulvaney & Meber, 2010; Vittrup & Holden, 2010; Whipple & Richey, 1997). Unfortunately, these studies were primarily conducted in relation to parent-initiated corporal punishment, without extending it to the broader forms of abuse. Although it is still argued that corporal punishment should be differentiated from abuse, it should be recognized as a minor form of abuse within the continuum rather than as dichotomous (Lansford et al., 2005; Straus, 1994; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998; Whipple & Richey, 1997).

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (hereafter referred to as the Committee) provides interpretation and guidance regarding implementation of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights the Child (CRC) through its General Comments. In its recent General Comment No. 13 on The Rights of the Child to Freedom from All Forms of Violence, the Committee includes corporal punishment as a form of violence against children (United Nations, 2011). Physical and intentional harm and non-physical and non-intentional forms of abuse are all considered forms of violence inflicted upon children.

Tisak (1986) found that children's perspectives on punishment pertaining to the legitimacy and fairness were likely to be critical determinants in evaluating the given event. Children's acceptance of the abuse was also found to minimize its impact (Lansford et al., 2005, 2004; Mulvaney & Meber, 2010; Shields, Cicchetti, & Ryan, 1994; Vittrup & Holden, 2010; Whipple & Richey, 1997). However, research studying the impact of corporal punishment from a broader range of perpetrators is needed.

Much evidence regarding the multitude of negative effects of child abuse is available. Problems with interpersonal relationships (Cho & Lee, 2004; Davis & Patrick-Jackson, 2000; Davis, Patrick-Jackson, & Ting, 2001; Dodge Reyome, 2010; Kim, Talbot, & Cicchetti, 2009; Lee, 2006a, b; Ornduff, Kelsey, & O'Leary, 2001; Paradis & Boucher, 2010) and depression are often cited as direct effects of child abuse (Afifi, Broenridge, Cox, & Sareen, 2006; Colder, Lochman, & Wells, 1997; Kim & Lee, 2009; Lee & Jung, 2010; Sperry & Gilbert, 2005). Disclosure of child sexual abuse (CSA) is reported to be a substantial factor in predicting subsequent outcomes for the victim (Alaggia, 2004; Gooman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Kim, Choi, & Shin, 2011). In particular, shame experienced when disclosing CSA may be a strong mediating variable for depression and interpersonal conflict (Kim et al., 2011). To date, most research into these phenomena has involved samples of young people seen in clinical settings. There is a need to extend the research to community samples especially in Asian countries where there has been relatively little analysis for sexual abuse disclosure, as research primarily focusing on clinical subjects may result in an inaccurate picture of the relationship between child abuse and the subsequent aftermath (Belt & Abidin, 1996; Park, 1999). Despite the multitude of research on child maltreatment, concerns regarding measurement continue (Dunne et al., 2009; Hulme, 2004).

The first purpose of the present study was to explore the prevalence of childhood maltreatment using ICAST-R. We further sought to examine violence occurring in the various settings as recommended in the UN Violence Study by modifying ICAST-R, an internationally accepted tool, to reflect the Korean cultural context. A second purpose was to examine associations between the perception of abuse experienced during childhood and recent interpersonal problems and depression in young South Korean adults. Perception of the maltreatment included perception as justifiable discipline to the victim, and reasonable when compared to the discipline of other children. In the case of experiences of sexual abuse, we examined disclosure of the experience instead of the perception of the actual event.

Method

Participants

Participants between the age range of 18–24 years old were solicited from universities, work places, and clinical settings. These settings were selected because they represented typical settings for young persons in South Korea within the age group required for ICAST-R. Our academic, business, and clinical contacts were used to recruit participants. A total of 539 participants with the mean age of 20.1 years were finally included in the study. The purpose of the study was explained

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