Ethnicity, Culture, and Child Maltreatment

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Increasingly, child maltreatment research has begun to address ethnicity and culture in both empirical studies and theoretical articles. Despite the expansion of these efforts, cross-cultural research in child maltreatment has raised more questions than it has answered; and it has highlighted the elusiveness of culture-specific constructs to scientific study. Research to date has been hampered by several challenges including the failure to disentangle ethnicity and culture. In this article, we provide a review of research in this area and offer a critique and recommendations for enhancing the study of the role of culture and ethnicity in child maltreatment.

In recent years, the study of child maltreatment has increasingly sought to identify, examine, and understand issues related to culture and ethnicity. This increasing attention is, in part, due to heightened awareness of disparities in health and mental health for ethnic minorities. In particular, in the field of child maltreatment, evidence of disparities in rates of reported child maltreatment, rates of children residing in the foster care system, and frequency and intensity of services received have prompted researchers to study factors related to culture and ethnicity that impact child maltreatment (Derezotes, Poertner, & Testa, 2005). As a result, there is a growing body of empirical and conceptual articles examining such variables as ethnic differences in willingness to disclose abuse (Meston, Heiman, Trapnell, & Carlin, 1999; Wyatt, 1990), definitions of abuse (Collier, McClure, Collier, Otto, & Polloi, 1999), and the distinction between cultural and abusive parenting practices (Terao, Borrego, & Urquiza, 2001; see Miller & Cross, 2006 for a review). By identifying between-group differences, this literature emphasizes the importance of taking into account ethnicity and culture in understanding the many forms of child maltreatment.

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Despite efforts to shed light on the role of culture in maltreatment, research has been hampered by several challenges. One notable problem is the failure to disentangle the constructs of ethnicity and culture. In fact, many researchers have sought to study culture and child maltreatment using ethnicity as a proxy. That is, research has focused on comparing child maltreatment across broad ethnic groups in the hopes of illuminating cultural differences that contribute to disparities in child maltreatment. Culture is not synonymous with ethnicity, however, and studies highlighting ethnic differences may obscure the salient underlying cultural factors. In the current article, we begin to disentangle the relationships among ethnicity, culture, and child maltreatment. First, we review studies investigating ethnic differences across a broad range of maltreatment characteristics. This review targets the three most well-documented and well-studied forms of maltreatment: sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect. Second, we discuss ethnic differences in children’s representation in the child welfare system (CWS), including several reasons proposed for such differences. Third, we describe several problems associated with the study of ethnicity and maltreatment, and we highlight studies that have attempted to resolve some of these problems. Fourth, we offer a set of specific recommendations regarding important remaining questions and new directions for research. Of note, for the purposes of this article, ethnicity is defined as membership in a group based on a common ancestry, heritage, culture, or history, and culture is defined as the shared values, behaviors, beliefs, norms, traditions, customs, and ideas of subgroups of individuals.

**Ethnicity and Maltreatment Characteristics**

Research examining differences in child sexual abuse (CSA), physical abuse, and neglect has generally produced diverse and conflicting findings. In the following review, we provide an overview of key studies and a summary and interpretation of results. Although the studies reviewed are not exhaustive, they represent general trends in the literature.

**Childhood sexual abuse.** Recent literature reviews suggest that, of the three traditionally identified and studied areas of child maltreatment (CSA, physical abuse, and neglect), CSA has received the most research attention (Chaffin, this journal issue), despite being the least prevalent form (Finkelhor & Jones, this journal issue). Several empirical investigations have focused on ethnic differences in both the prevalence of CSA as well as in children’s actual CSA experiences, willingness to disclose, attributions regarding CSA, and mental health sequelae.

Regarding CSA prevalence, surveillance data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS; Department of Health and Human Services, 2005) suggest minimal differences in rates of reported CSA among the ethnicities surveyed. Latino and non-Latino White children were reported for CSA at rates
of 7.4% and 8.8% in 2003, respectively. These rates were slightly higher than those for African-American, American-Indian, Asian, Asian-Pacific Islander, and multiple-race children who were reported for sexual abuse at rates of 5.3, 4.0, 5.3, 5.0, and 4.3%, respectively.

Other work concerning differences in prevalence of CSA among ethnic groups has relied on small and geographically diverse samples. The bulk of this research has involved retrospective reports of adult victims of CSA and has utilized various definitions of CSA. Not surprisingly in light of this variability, the research has produced conflicting findings.

For example, several studies have reported significant ethnic differences, although the directions of the differences have varied. An early retrospective study by Kercher and McShane (1984) indicated that more Latina women reported having experienced CSA than African-American and non-Latina White women. In contrast, Urquiza and Goodlin-Jones (1994) reported lower levels of CSA for Latina women in their sample of college students. A third study, of CSA reports in Los Angeles County, indicated that African-American children were reported as CSA victims more frequently than Latino and non-Latino White children, who had equal numbers of reports (Lindholm & Wiley, 1986). A few studies have failed to find differences in the prevalence of CSA across groups (Wyatt, 1985, 1999). Studies investigating rates of CSA with American-Indian populations report rates from 12.7% to 49% (Kunitz, Levy, McCloskey, & Gabriel, 1998; Robin, Chester, Rasmussen, & Goldman, 1997), percentages that are consistent with those reported in other ethnic groups in retrospective studies (the large range in reported rates is in part due to differences in definitions of sexual abuse and is a phenomenon frequently noted in CSA research).

Further insights into ethnic differences in the prevalence of CSA may be garnered through the examination of international child maltreatment research. This research, unlike research examining differences within different U.S. ethnic groups, is suggestive of CSA rates that are fairly similar to those reported in the United States. Such was the case in a relatively recent study of Palestinian college students (Haj-Yahia & Tamish, 2001). Finkelhor (1994) reviewed research in 19 countries and observed that the prevalence of CSA was largely comparable across countries (although he did not survey Asian countries). Lampe (2002) reported similar results based on a review of research investigating sexual abuse in European countries.

One exception to trends indicating CSA prevalence similarity across countries is presented by studies conducted in Asian countries. Several studies have found lower levels of CSA among Chinese children relative to U.S. children (Chen, Dunne, & Hanne, 2004; Chen, Dunne, & Wang, 2003; Tang, 2002). One possible explanation for lower rates of sexual abuse in Asian groups compared to non-Latino Whites is that conservative cultural norms which frown upon sexual activity at an early age exert a protective influence against the experience of CSA
(Chen et al., 2004). Support for this trend emerges in findings of lower levels of CSA for Asian-American children compared to non-Latino Whites in the United States (Futa, Hsu, & Hansen, 2001; Urquiza & Goodlin-Jones, 1994). Alternatively, lower levels of CSA reported in Asian and Asian-American communities may be explained by differences in willingness to disclose abuse. It is possible that conservative cultural norms and/or a strong cultural emphasis on family and collectivistic beliefs, filial piety, and restraint in emotional expression may reduce Asian children’s willingness to report CSA. This reluctance to disclose CSA is another potential cause of the observed lower rates of CSA in Asian communities.

In summary, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions concerning ethnic differences in the prevalence of CSA based on current literature. Nor is it clear whether there truly are differences in prevalence of CSA across cultures and nations or whether there are biases in reporting that appear when prevalence statistics are carefully examined. The extant evidence suggests that children are sexually abused at relatively comparable rates across cultures, perhaps with minor variations. A potential exception to this comparability in need of further investigation, however, concerns Asian groups. Findings suggest that CSA may be less common among Asians, but further research is needed to confirm this trend and, if it remains, determine why.

Moving beyond prevalence, empirical work examining ethnic differences in willingness to disclose CSA, abuse characteristics, and reactions to CSA again finds inconsistent results. For instance, although as mentioned above, it has been hypothesized that Asian, as well as Hispanic, children are less likely to disclose sexual abuse because of cultural norms emphasizing family loyalty and filial piety (Comas-Diaz, 1995; Okamura, Heras, & Wong-Kerberg, 1995), only one study reported findings that were partially consistent with this assertion (Rao, DiClemente, & Ponton, 1992). Specifically, in a retrospective chart review, Rao and colleagues found that Asian-American children were less likely to experience invasive forms of CSA, were less likely to disclose abuse, and were less likely to have caregivers who were supportive of them following disclosure than were Latino, African-American, and non-Latino White children (Rao et al., 1992). In contrast, Meston et al. (1999) found no ethnic differences in reluctance to disclose CSA between Asian-American college students and non-Latino White college students, although the Asian-American students reported lower overall rates of CSA. Mixed findings have also emerged in research comparing CSA disclosure among African-American, Latino, and non-Latino White samples. On the one hand, Pierce and Pierce (1984) found that African-American children were more willing to disclose CSA than non-Latino White children. In contrast, Wyatt (1990) found no significant differences in rates of disclosure between African-American and non-Latina White women in retrospective self-reports. A study examining length of time prior to disclosure found that Latina girls waited longer to disclose (average delay 19 months) CSA than African-American girls (average delay 9 months; Shaw, Lewis,
Loeb, Rosado, & Rodriguez, 2001). The process of abuse disclosure is a complex one, and discrepant results observed in these studies may be due to a number of factors that co-vary with willingness to disclose. Research examining cultural values and attitudes related to CSA may assist in elucidating the link between ethnicity and disclosure of abuse.

Studies examining severity of abuse have not revealed consistent group differences. That is, although some studies suggest that particular groups experience CSA of longer duration (Latino; Feiring, Coates, & Taska, 2001), or greater rates of penetration (African American; Shaw et al., 2001), most research suggests that there is no consistent pattern of differences in the severity of CSA, at least across African-American, non-Latino White, and Latino children (Wyatt, 1990). Similarly, Kellogg and Hoffman (2000) found no ethnic differences between Latinas and White women in self-blame and negative perceptions of their victimization. One of the challenges, however, associated with the study of the relations between factors such as ethnicity and CSA severity concerns significant associations between severity and other characteristics that may also differ across ethnic groups. For instance, both the closeness of the perpetrator–victim relationship and the duration of abuse may be related to abuse severity (Kendall-Tackett, Finkelhor, & Williams, 1993; Goodman et al., 1992). Similarly, the use of threats or force may also relate to abuse severity. Thus, there is a clear need to examine, using multivariate models, which precise CSA characteristics vary across ethnic groups, and which are simply associated with other characteristics that vary.

Finally, several studies have compared victims’ emotional responses to CSA across ethnic groups. Shaw and colleagues (2001), for instance, assessed emotional problems in 159 African-American and Latina sexually abused girls and found that Latina girls were more likely to have behavioral and emotional problems. Increased risk for problems among Latinas was also reported by Feiring and colleagues (2001), who found that Latina girls were more likely to express shame and self-blame for CSA when compared to non-Latino White and African-American girls. Yet, somewhat different results were obtained in a recent study involving a college student sample. Andres-Hyman, Cott, and Gold (2004) found that Latina women reported experiencing fewer mental health symptoms related to CSA when compared to non-Latina White women. In one of the few studies to assess symptoms in Asian Americans, Rao, DiClemente, and Ponton (1992) found that Asian-American CSA victims were less likely to exhibit behavioral and emotional disturbances than African-American, non-Latino White, and Latino victims. Other studies, in contrast to those reporting ethnic differences, have failed to identify stable and consistent pattern of differences in mental health symptoms among CSA victims across ethnicities (Mennen, 1994; Wyatt, 1990).

To summarize, efforts to understand ethnic differences in CSA have yielded mixed and often conflicting results. Yet, direct comparison across studies is difficult due to the use of different samples (i.e., retrospective reports by adult survivors,
surveys of child victims and their parents) and disparate research methods (i.e., chart reviews, interviews, and report databases). Further, different definitions of terms such as sexual abuse and abuse severity preclude an easy interpretation of divergent findings. Finally, CSA studies have generally compared the broad ethnic categorizations: Latino, African American, non-Latino White, and, in a few studies, Asian. Relatively little attention has been paid to within-group differences and even less attention paid to other subpopulations, such as Pacific Islanders, Filipino Americans, Cuban Americans, Alaska natives, and others. Thus, a coherent picture of cultural variables relevant to research and practice in CSA has not yet emerged from the current literature. A promising note, however, to which we return later, is evident in a few studies that have begun to address some of the problems noted here.

*Child physical abuse.* Research concerning ethnicity and child physical abuse has tended to focus on differences in the prevalence of child physical abuse and in child-rearing and discipline techniques among ethnic groups. According to large, nationally representative survey data (i.e., the NCANDS data), rates of child physical abuse among ethnic groups do vary (DHHS, 2005). Specifically, the percentage of incidents of physical abuse reported fell between 8–17% across ethnic groups, but for African Americans and Asian Americans, the rates were somewhat higher (15.3%, 16.6%, respectively) compared to non-Latino Whites, Latinos, and mixed-race children (12.2%, 13.3%, 11.1%, respectively). For American-Indian and Pacific-Islander children physical abuse accounted for only 9.7% and 8.6% of reports, respectively.

Aside from the aforementioned national survey data, empirical research investigating ethnic differences in physical abuse is relatively scant, in part because physical abuse frequently occurs in combination with other forms of abuse and is thus difficult to study in isolation. The results of those studies that have been conducted present a somewhat murky picture. For instance, a study that examined abuse in a sample of Asian-Pacific Islanders referred for services suggested that rates of physical abuse compared to sexual abuse and neglect mirror the national reported rates (Ima & Hohm, 1991). However, this study further explored differences within the Asian community and found that Vietnamese and Cambodian Americans were significantly overrepresented relative to Hmong, Filipino, Samoan, Laotian, and Korean Americans in the population referred to child protective services. The authors complemented this data with an ethnographic study, which revealed that higher rates of reported abuse in Vietnamese and Cambodian participants might be associated with variables such as greater exposure to war-related trauma and poorer English fluency. A recent study Maker, Shah, and Agha (2005) found that Latina, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and East Asian college women reported having experienced levels of physical abuse higher than those reported by African-American and non-Latina White women. In a retrospective
case control study, Kunitz and colleagues (1998) interviewed 1,026 Navajo adults regarding their experiences of abuse as children. The results of this study contradict national data indicating higher rates of abuse in American-Indian populations and instead point to comparable rates of physical and sexual abuse. Specifically, this study indicated that Navajo adults report similar rates of physical abuse (12.4% reported experiencing physical abuse as children) and sexual abuse (2.4% for men, 12.7% for women) as reported in populations of other ethnicities. However, the differences in methodology (retrospective interview data vs. prevalence among child abuse reports) may account for the disparate findings. Taken together these studies illustrate the complexity of the issue of ethnicity and child physical abuse. Within-group variability appears to be significant, and therefore, cross-ethnic comparisons may be of limited value.

In contrast to the paucity of research directly examining ethnic differences in child physical abuse prevalence, a wealth of research has investigated differences in parenting among caregivers of different ethnicities and nationalities. Many studies have identified discrepancies in the way parents view and employ disciplinary strategies, in the expression of warmth and affection, in parenting attributions, and in their definitions of what constitutes abuse. For example, a study by Hill, Bush, and Roosa (2003) found that Mexican American children and mothers reported higher levels of hostile control and inconsistent parenting than non-Latino White parents. Interestingly, this study also found that the relationship between parenting style and mental health problems differed for children based on children’s language preference, with hostile control and inconsistent parenting predicting conduct problems for English-speaking Mexican-American families but not for Spanish-speaking Mexican-American families. The authors suggest that acculturation-related values may moderate the relationship between parenting style and child outcomes. Cardona and colleagues (2000) compared Latino-American and non-Latino White mothers’ responses on a parenting measure and found that Latinas reported using discipline more frequently and nurturing less frequently than their non-Latina White counterparts. However, their study noted that Latina mothers with higher socioeconomic status (SES) used disciplinary tactics more than lower SES Latina mothers and suggested that the cross-ethnic differences found may be attributable to high SES Latina mothers reporting high rates of corporal punishment, which may or may not be physically abusive. Finally, a study by Caughy and Franzini (2005) reviewed below found differences in disciplinary techniques endorsed by African-American, non-Latino White, and Latina parents, however these differences were moderated by neighborhood variables such as levels of social cohesion and collective efficacy.

In summary, evidence suggests that ethnic differences in parenting exist; however, these differences are influenced by a variety of factors including acculturation levels, socioeconomic status, and neighborhood variables. A detailed review of this literature is beyond the scope of this article, but it is important to note that in con-
Contrast to many of the other topics and types of child maltreatment reviewed in this article, the area of parenting has more consistently documented differences in parenting across cultures (Straus & Donnelly, 2001; Wasserman, Raul, & Brunelli, 1990).

Neglect. Of the three traditionally studied areas of child maltreatment we have reviewed, the role ethnicity plays in child neglect has received the least attention in the research literature. Few studies have focused on neglect and even fewer have examined culture and child neglect. Despite the lack of research focus, however, neglect is by far the most common form of child maltreatment for all ethnic groups except possibly for Pacific Islanders, who according to the NCANDS data had higher rates of “psychological maltreatment only, other only, or unknown only” (DHHS, 2005). Overall, neglect accounted for 49.9% of all child maltreatment reports, with ranges across ethnicities of 47.6–67.8% (excluding Pacific Islanders; DHHS, 2005).

In one of the few studies exploring ethnic differences in child neglect, Rose and Meezan (1996) assessed perceptions of neglect among Latino, African-American, and non-Latino White parents. Results indicated that African-American and Latino parents were similar in their perceptions of the behaviors that constituted neglect. Both groups emphasized exploitation, inadequate supervision, and exposing children to unwholesome circumstances as harmful and neglectful behavior. In contrast, the non-Latino White parents tended to focus on the inadequate provision of food and education as constituting neglect.

Racial and Ethnic Disproportionality in the CWS

For the past decade there has been growing concern over the significant over-representation of children of color in the CWS. According to data collected in 2003 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS, 2005), collapsing all categories of maltreatment, African Americans are reportedly victimized at a rate of 20.4 per thousand, Native American children are victimized at a rate of 21.3 per thousand, and Pacific Islander children have victimization rates of 21.4 per thousand. In contrast, non-Latino Whites, Latino, and Asian children are reportedly victimized at relatively low rates of 11.0, 9.9, and 2.7 per thousand, respectively. Thus, despite variation in prevalence reported by empirical studies above, the national database of child abuse reports documents consistent disparities in rates of reported child maltreatment. In addition, evidence indicates that African-American, Latino, and Native American children are overrepresented in the foster care system. Forty-five percent of the children in out-of-home care are African American compared to 36% of non-Latino White children (Derezotes et al., 2005).

In 2002, the Race Matters Consortium was developed through a partnership
between academic institutions and private research corporations to identify and address causes of racial disproportionality in the CWS (Derezotes et al., 2005). One outcome of these efforts has been the publication of a series of empirical studies in a volume entitled “Race Matters in Child Welfare: The Overrepresentation of African American Children in the System” (Derezotes et al., 2005). The studies focused largely on institutional inequities that may occur at several points of encounter in the CWS. These inequities can be heuristically categorized as reflecting “entry” versus “exit” factors.

Entry factors include those events that increase the proportion of children of color entering the CWS. For example, disproportionalities in entry may arise because community members, service providers, teachers, or other individuals who have contact with children are biased in their reporting of child abuse. That is, people may be more likely, given similar circumstances and events, to report children of color than non-Latino Whites to child protective agencies (Barth, 2005). Biases may also arise in the investigation phase. Case workers entrusted with the task of screening for child maltreatment may be more likely to investigate a case or to perceive a situation as abusive if an ethnic minority child is involved. Such bias would lead to higher substantiation rates as well as higher rates of intervention for families of color (Barth, 2005). Finally, case workers may also mandate more restrictive or punitive interventions for families of color such as mandated parenting classes and removal of children from their homes.

Despite theoretical reasons suggesting that entry factors contribute to ethnic differences in children’s involvement in the CWS, empirical research once again yields a confusing picture. It appears that, although biases in investigation of child abuse reports do exist, they vary based on the type of abuse. A study by Gryzlak, Wells, and Johnson (2005) suggests that when a report is filed that involves more than one child and abuse other than sexual abuse, children of color are more likely to be investigated. In contrast, for reports of sexual abuse, children of color are less likely to be investigated. Sedlak and Schultz (2001) also found differential effects of race based on type of maltreatment, with reports of emotional maltreatment and physical neglect resulting in greater rates of investigation for African-American children than for non-Latino White children. Rolock and Testa (2005) found that reports made for African Americans were more likely to be investigated regardless of investigator race. When differences based on type of maltreatment were examined, Rolock and Testa found that the main effects for race held, with African Americans being investigated at higher rates. Finally, studies suggest that given similar circumstances, African-American children are more likely than non-Latino White children to be placed in foster care (Hill, 2005; Lau, McCabe, & Yeh, 2004).

Exit factors refer to events that lead to longer lengths of stay in the CWS. Once an abuse report is substantiated, a case is opened for the family in CWS. The case remains open until the abuse issue is resolved either through successful
completion of program requirements by parents, reunification of the child with the parents, or placement in either a guardianship or adoptive family. For families of color, the length of time before a case is closed is longer. For instance, ethnic minority children tend to stay in foster care longer than non-Latino White children (Church, Gross, & Baldwin, 2005; Derezotes et al., 2005). This difference may be due to differential access to supportive and reunification services, differential rates of adoption, and higher rates of re-entry to foster care (Barth, 2005). In fact, studies suggest that African-American children spend longer periods of time in foster care prior to reunification with parents (Goerge & Bilaver, 2005).

The aforementioned focus on entry and exit factors presumes that the actual rates of maltreatment are similar across ethnic groups. That is, the ethnic differences in children’s representation in CWS are due to variations in the system’s response to children from different ethnic backgrounds. However, an alternative explanation to understanding the overrepresentation of children of color in the CWS is to identify factors that place ethnic minority children at elevated risk for child maltreatment. From this perspective, ethnic minority children are exposed to higher rates of risk factors. This elevated level of risk results in higher rates of maltreatment in ethnic minority communities. For example, African-American children are more likely to be poor, to live in single-parent homes, and in homes with more than four children, and to live with caregivers who are unemployed (Derezotes et al., 2005). All of these factors are associated with increased risk for maltreatment and may explain higher rates of maltreatment in ethnic minority populations.

Even so, a recent study suggests that, in fact, African-American children are at lower risk for maltreatment (Sedlak & Shultz, 2005). The National Incidence Studies (NIS), a series of survey studies conducted by the federal government in 1980 and 1986, cast a wider net in identifying abuse victims. The NIS gathered data from a variety of sources including police, community health professionals, schools, and hospitals. Thus, this database is seen as a more comprehensive assessment of actual child abuse prevalence than the National Child Abuse and Neglect Database, which relies solely on cases reported to state child protective service agencies. The three NIS reported no significant differences in rates of abuse across ethnic groups. Sedlak and Schultz (2001) suggest that, given the high level of risk factors present for the African-American children in the NIS samples (many of which are mentioned previously), ethnic differences should be expected. The lack of significant ethnic differences indicates that African-American children may actually be less at risk for maltreatment when they are exposed to the same levels of risk factors as are other children. This research provides at least some evidence against the argument that ethnic minority children experience higher rates of maltreatment and suggests that racial disproportionality may instead be due to institutional discrimination. However, in light of other studies reporting positive associations between exposure to risk and risk of child maltreatment (Derezotes
et al. 2005), it is dangerous to discount the influence of such factors as violent neighborhoods, poverty, substance abuse, and other risks that may be more common in ethnic minority versus non-Latino White families.

In summary, there is no definitive answer to the question: “What is the root cause of the differential representation of children of color in the CWS?” despite evidence clearly indicating that children of color are overrepresented in the system. Biases in the system—either in “entry” or “exit” factors—may drive this disproportionality. Alternatively, children of color may, in fact, be maltreated at higher rates than non-Latino Whites rates because of the former’s increased likelihood of exposure to risk. It is most likely a complex interplay of risk factors and institutional and systemic biases that have led to the persistent and gross overrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities in the CWS. Multilevel and multivariate statistical analyses are needed to tease apart the mechanisms contributing to certain the overrepresentation of children of color in the CWS.

Critique

As is evident from our description of research concerning ethnic differences in maltreatment experiences, studies have failed to yield a coherent picture of the impact of ethnicity on child maltreatment. Yet, several limitations of much of the current research may explain the lack of consistent findings, and, evidence from a few studies that have begun to address these limitations holds promise for elucidating when and how ethnicity plays a role in child maltreatment.

One problem stems from what many authors have called “ethnic lumping”: the use of broad ethnic categorizations in the study of cultural differences (Fontes, 2005). That is, the bulk of research investigating ethnicity and child maltreatment has examined non-Latino White, African-American, Latino, and—to a lesser extent—Asian-American groups. The emphasis on these large ethnic categorizations discounts the diversity of cultures within these categories and obscures potentially important intra-group differences. For example, the category “Asian American” includes groups with such diverse backgrounds and histories as third generation Chinese Americans and recently immigrated Hmong refugees. The manner in which a Hmong family perceives and addresses child maltreatment, the family’s risk for engaging in child abuse, and parenting attitudes may differ widely from that of a third-generation Chinese-American family. Studies that focus on differences between broadly-defined ethnic groups (e.g., Asian American, Latino, African American, non-Latino Whites) and ignore the variability within groups may lead to the erroneous application of stereotypes to individuals and families and obscure true cultural differences that affect prevalence, reporting, and experiences of child maltreatment.

In the field of ethnic minority psychology, attempts to move beyond these broad categorizations have focused on measuring within-group variability through
concepts such as acculturation, ethnic identity, and racial identity (e.g., Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995). The construct of acculturation, defined as the degree to which an individual adopts values, behaviors, and norms of the host country or dominant culture and retains or eschews elements of the culture of origin, has been used to improve our understanding of the relationship between culture and mental health. For example, acculturation is correlated with factors such as mental health symptoms, service utilization, depressive symptoms, substance use, and parenting (Acevedo, 2000; Moyerman & Forman, 1992; Rahman & Rollock, 2004; Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1990; Yeh, 2003).

Although the application of the construct of acculturation has enhanced the study of ethnic minority psychology, it has not been applied consistently in the field of child maltreatment. Furthermore, there are limitations to the utility of this construct in elucidating cultural phenomena that bear directly on children’s risk for child maltreatment. In particular, measures of acculturation frequently rely on individuals’ endorsement of preference for particular foods and language preference in everyday conversation, reading, and writing (Cuellar et al., 1995; Kim & Omizo, 2006; Mak & Zane, 2003). Other aspects of acculturation, such as changes in cultural values, are generally not surveyed in traditional acculturation measures. Yet individuals’ beliefs and attitudes regarding parenting, family role expectations, and gender role expectations may be more relevant to child maltreatment than more concrete factors such as language, reading, and writing preferences. Thus, although theoretically the incorporation of acculturation into maltreatment research may further our understanding of group differences, measures of these constructs may need to be adapted or altered to tap into those aspects of acculturation that are most relevant to parenting, families, and child maltreatment.

Researchers in the field of ethnic minority psychology have advocated the systematic identification and operationalization of elements of culture to study more effectively the role of culture in mental health. That is, recent research endeavors have focused on what Korbin (2002) calls “unpacking culture.” For example, Kim and Zane (2004) investigated the relationship between a cultural-specific attribute in domestic violence. Their study compared Korean-American and non-Latino White adult male batterers with independent self-construals (self-perceptions that emphasize autonomy and independence) versus interdependent self-construals (self-perceptions that emphasize connectedness with others). They hypothesized that Korean-American men in their study would express less anger and control their anger more, and that this ethnic difference would be mediated by interdependent self-construals. Although this hypothesis was not supported, their study provides an excellent template for integrating cultural constructs into the study of ethnic differences in mental health. Similarly, a study investigating sexual aggression in non-Latino White, mainland Asian-American, and Hawaiian Asian-American men examined the role of several cultural constructs: ethnic identity,
loss of face, and perceived minority status. Their results support the notion that the cultural value, loss of face, is a protective factor for perpetration of sexual aggression (Hall, Teten, DeGarmo, Sue, and Stephens, 2005). These studies illustrate the importance of deconstructing and operationalizing culture. In both studies, the examination of ethnic differences is complemented by an effort to identify cultural values and attitudes that mediate the ethnic differences observed.

A similar approach in the field of child maltreatment that would involve deconstructing and operationalizing culture would entail asking questions such as: What cultural values make families resilient to the experience of family violence despite exposure to stress? What cultural traditions and roles serve as buffers for families? Such an approach has rarely been applied in the study of child maltreatment, although a few studies have attempted to document relations between cultural values and child maltreatment, thereby paving the way for continued research. We review four such studies next.

An early study by Dubanowski (1982) compared rates of child abuse and neglect in non-Latino White and Hawaiian Americans. Dubanowski identified several cultural values that might buffer Hawaiian-American families from the experience of family violence including the importance of children in the family, the importance of parental responsivity, and the diffusion of parenting responsibilities among extended family. His prediction that traditional Hawaiian values would lead to reduced child abuse in this community was not borne out. Instead, his results indicated non-Latino Whites were underrepresented and Hawaiian Americans were overrepresented in cases of confirmed child maltreatment. However, Dubanowski did not empirically survey and measure levels of adherence to these values. Thus, his methodology precludes the examination of the relationship between cultural values and maltreatment. Nonetheless, this study represents an early attempt to identify elements of culture that might differentially affect the experience of family violence across ethnic groups.

Another example in which culture was deconstructed stems from Coohey (2001), who examined the relations between attitudinal familism and child abuse within Latino families. Familism refers to the extent to which one values family and extended family, places importance on family obligations, and uses family as referents (Sabogal, Martin, & Otero-Sabogal, 1987). Many authors have proposed that familism is a value that is strongly emphasized in Latino culture (Buriel & Rivera, 1980; Sabogal et al., 1987). Coohey found that nonabusive mothers reported higher levels of familism than did abusive mothers. This result suggests that familism may be a value that buffers families from the experience of abuse. That is, families that retain the strong sense of family interconnectedness, cohesion, and family obligations traditional in Latino families may be less likely to engage in abusive behavior.

Ferrari (2002) studied several “ingredients of ethnicity” (p. 807) relevant to child maltreatment. Like Coohey, she examined parents’ adherence to familism;
however, she further examined the machismo (a rigid adherence to gender roles) and a belief she termed “valuing children.” Ferrari suggests that “valuing children” is a characteristic that differs in intensity across cultures and is likely related to child maltreatment. She surveyed not only Latino families, but also African-American and non-Latino White families, using two layers of analysis to investigate the effects of ethnicity and cultural values separately. She found that independently of cultural values, ethnicity predicted nurturing behaviors. African-American parents reported higher levels of nurturing behaviors than Latino parents. This is in contrast to previous findings that report a higher level of endorsement of physical discipline in African-American families (Straus & Donnelly, 2001). In addition, African-American parents in her study reported higher levels of disapproval of delinquency-promoting behaviors. Moreover, when ethnicity was controlled, Ferrari found that cultural values predicted reported parenting behaviors and scores on abuse measures for fathers, but not mothers. This result contrasts with Coohey’s study, which found that levels of familism differentiated nonabusive from abusive mothers. One difference between the studies that may account for the conflicting findings is that Coohey used reported abusive behavior to differentiate her participants while Ferrari measured abuse potential through responses on a parenting survey. More research is needed to clarify the relationship between these cultural values and maltreatment in Latino communities.

Finally, a recent study investigated the role of cultural values in parenting behaviors of mainland Chinese mothers (Xu et al., 2005). In contrast to the above studies, this study did not focus on maltreatment, however it is worth mentioning because the study draws on earlier work (Kim, Atkinson, & Yang, 1999) in its operationalization and measurement of a number of cultural values and its efforts to relate these to parenting beliefs. In particular, to measure adherence to cultural values, the authors asked mothers to rate their endorsement of the following cultural values: conformity to norms, family recognition through achievement, emotional self-control, collectivism, and humility. Results revealed that greater endorsement of traditional Chinese values was positively related to both authoritarian and authoritative parenting. The authors suggest that for Chinese mothers espousing traditional values, behaviors such as obedience and propriety may be more important than for mothers who endorse traditional values less. Future research may illuminate whether this emphasis on obedience and propriety is a risk or protective factor for abuse.

**Recommendations**

The aforementioned studies represent important, innovative efforts to disentangle the relations among ethnicity, culture, and child maltreatment. However, these studies, like those concerning ethnic differences in both the prevalence of child maltreatment and in characteristics of children’s abuse experiences, represent
only the beginning of this important line of inquiry. In light of this starting point, it is useful to step back and identify how we can improve and expand current research efforts in this area to continue to advance our understanding of the links among culture, ethnicity, and maltreatment. Next, we highlight four key directions in this line of research.

1. Expanding and Examining the Definition of Culture

First, the definition of culture must be continually reexamined. Culture is often described as the shared values, norms, behaviors, and attitudes of a group of people. In the research reviewed thus far, culture has been, most often, tied directly to ethnicity, with ethnic group membership tacitly responsible for determining one’s culture. However, an individual’s culture may be influenced by membership in various groups. A person may consider him/herself a member of a community, of a professional group, or of a neighborhood. Broader conditions such as geographic location or socioeconomic status may also influence an individual’s attitudes, values, beliefs, and behavior. For example, a wealthy Mexican-American adult living in Los Angeles is likely to hold different values and attitudes and may have different traditions, norms, and expectations about behavior than a poor Mexican-American adult living in rural Iowa. Thus, although the importance of ethnicity in influencing cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors should not be underestimated, studies of culture would do well to take into account other salient cultural influences.

Recently, a number of studies have examined “ecological factors” related to maltreatment, several of which (e.g., neighborhood variables) have implications for understanding the influence of ethnicity in maltreatment. Ecological factors refer to broad social or structural variables that may affect individual propensity to engage in particular behavior, in this case, behavior that puts children at risk for maltreatment. Freisthler, Merritt, and LaScala (2006) reviewed empirical studies that examined the role of ecological factors in increasing the risk for child abuse and neglect. Ecological variables that emerged as potentially important included impoverishment, child care burden, the availability of drugs and alcohol, the level of neighborhood overcrowding, and rates of unemployment in neighborhoods or census tracts. Of interest, of the 18 studies reviewed, six included ethnicity in the analyses, with some reporting significant associations among ethnicity, the ecological factors, and maltreatment. For example, in a study examining ethnic differences in endorsement of disciplinary practices, Caughy and Franzini (2005) found that African-American and European-American parents were less likely to endorse “explain” as a disciplinary tactic and more likely to consider spanking and threatening as effective strategies when compared to Latino-American respondents. However, a different pattern of results was obtained when neighborhood differences were taken into account. For example, in neighborhoods characterized by social cohesion and control compared to other neighborhoods, African-American and
Latino-American respondents were less likely to endorse yelling and threatening. The authors suggest that neighborhood variables may exert a differential impact on the parenting views of Latino-American, African-American, and non-Latino White families. Clearly the broader social context in which children of different ethnicities live and develop must be considered as it relates to not only ethnicity, but also culture and maltreatment risk.

In addition to studies on ecological and neighborhood variables, a line of research in the field of public health holds promise for moving the study of ethnicity, culture, and maltreatment forward. Public health researchers have increasingly investigated the role of social conditions in creating and maintaining health disparities. In particular, this line of research utilizes epidemiological methods to examine the impact of various factors termed “social determinants” on various outcomes. Social determinants are conditions such as education level, occupation, the experience of discrimination, social integration, social capital, and income level that affect health and mental health (Berkman & Kawachi, 2000). The study of these variables shifts the focus from individual level risk factors to societal factors. By highlighting the importance of societal factors in perpetuating disparities in health, mental health, and, in this case, maltreatment, this research emphasizes social responsibility for the occurrence of violence and paves the way for broad policy and advocacy efforts.

2. Identifying Proximal and Relevant Cultural Variables

Second, studies of culture, ethnicity, and maltreatment should continue to focus on identifying and examining cultural correlates that are proximal to the experience of child maltreatment (Zane, Hall, Sue, Young, & Nunez, 2004). As noted above, research in ethnic minority psychology has begun to identify values that are culture specific or present to a greater degree in particular ethnic minority groups. In addition to the research reviewed above, studies have identified values such as filial piety, family recognition through achievement, emotional self-control, conformity to norms, collectivism, and humility as salient in Asian-American cultures (Kim et al., 1999). Familism, personalismo, machismo, folk beliefs, and fatalism have been posited as salient values in Latino cultures (Cuellar et al., 1995b). Further work has sought to identify Africentric values such as “Umoja” or unity in the family, “Kujichagulia” or self-determination, and “Ujima” or collective work and responsibility (Cokley, 2005). How these values relate to parents’ behavior toward their children generally, and children’s risk for different forms of maltreatment specifically is a much-needed area of future research. One excellent example of this potential line of work is a theoretical article by Futa and colleagues (2001) in which the authors applied cultural values to understand correlates of CSA. In the article, the authors first review several characteristics of Asian-American worldviews including the importance of harmony with the environment, collectivism, adherence to family roles, conformity to norms, shame, self-control, and
fatalism. Second, the authors discuss the ways in which each of these values may impact the experience of CSA specifically in Asian-American families. Clearly the possibilities outlined by Futa and colleagues need to be examined empirically.

3. Bridging the Gap Between Fields

As noted above, advances made in fields such as ethnic minority psychology and public health may enhance research in child maltreatment. However, these advances are rarely integrated into research in child maltreatment. Collaboration between fields is essential to increase the effectiveness of child maltreatment research efforts, as well as prevention, identification, and intervention efforts. This collaboration may be accomplished in a number of ways. Child maltreatment researchers may seek consultation or develop formal relationships with researchers in the field of ethnic minority psychology. Cross-disciplinary mentoring, research collaboration, and integration of cultural constructs in child maltreatment curricula may increase the cultural responsivity of child maltreatment research.

The establishment of the National Centers for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC) at the Centers for Disease Control is a testament to the increased awareness of child maltreatment as a public health issue. By emphasizing a public health approach to the problem of child abuse and neglect, the NCIPC will facilitate and encourage the application of public health paradigms to child maltreatment research (see Whitaker, Lutzker, & Shelley, 2005, for a similar discussion). In general, integrating the public health approach may contribute specifically to efforts to evaluate potential ethnic disparities in child abuse and neglect by applying established surveillance methods and technology and using population-based approaches to the study of risk factors such as social determinants. This framework has the advantage of employing consistent survey technology over time to derive comparisons and identify patterns. Although this work is possible using such databases as the National Incidence Study and the National Data Archives on Child Abuse and Neglect, a public health framework has not been applied to analyses of these data to identify trends that would guide intervention efforts. The establishment of a national database system to study child maltreatment rates over time with emphasis on the identification of risk and protective factors is lacking (Whitaker et al., 2005).

4. Incorporating Innovative Research Methods

Several scholars have criticized the use of traditional quantitative methods to capture cultural variables (Ponterotto, 2003; Sue, 1999). As may be surmised from the aforementioned research, the dynamic and complex nature of culture renders it difficult to operationalize, quantify, and analyze using simple experimental techniques. Advances in the fields of statistics and research design may allow research to represent culture and its relationship with maltreatment more accurately. For instance, statistical techniques such as hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) and
cluster analysis may help researchers address the complexity of cultural issues and test models that reflect the interrelationships among the studied constructs. For example, two recent studies demonstrate the potential benefits of complex statistical procedures in child maltreatment research. Wissow (2001) used cluster analysis to identify groups of parents more likely to use spanking and less likely to use alternative discipline strategies. Findings indicated that ethnicity was not a factor that differentiated parents’ reliance on spanking versus other discipline strategies. Instead, parental levels of depression differentiated disciplinary practices. Coulton, Korbin, and Su (1999) used HLM to explore the relationships between ecological factors associated with child maltreatment and individual risk factors. Their study provides evidence for the idea that neighborhood variables such as cohesion and support moderate the effects of individual factors such as violence in the family of origin on maltreatment. Although their study did not incorporate ethnicity or culture, the methods used may be easily adapted to include these constructs and help clarify relationships among ethnicity, cultural values, ecological factors, and maltreatment.

Ponterotto (2003) recommends that more ethnic minority research include qualitative methods. Ethnographic methods hold promise for capturing the complexity of cultural constructs as well as for increasing the sensitivity and responsiveness of research with ethnic minority groups and of the researchers involved. In addition, qualitative methods enable increased participation and empowerment of research participants. Korbin and colleagues (1998) complemented their quantitative study of neighborhood variables associated with child maltreatment in African-American and non-Latino Whites communities with an ethnographic study of individuals’ perceptions of their communities. Of interest, the effects of ecological variables on maltreatment were mediated by perceptions of community connectedness. Continued research needs to examine, from multiple quantitative and qualitative analyses, how factors such as community connectedness vary or are interpreted by individuals of different ethnicities or cultures.

Finally, many authors have criticized the use of psychometric instruments that have insufficient validation with the ethnic minority populations studied (Ponterotto, 1998; Sue, 1999). The solution to this problem must be two tiered. First, efforts to validate existing measures and create new measures for use with diverse groups must continue. Second, researchers must be mindful of limitations associated with cross-ethnic and cross-cultural use of instruments and employ and integrate multiple methods of information gathering. Data collection might entail not only interviews, but also behavioral observations, focus groups, ethnographic research, and psychometric techniques to assess the constructs of interest.

Conclusions

Child maltreatment is a significant problem that affects individuals of all ethnicities. The experience of family violence erodes families and communities by
interrupting the transmission of positive cultural values and traditions. In families where there is violence, it is less likely that children will be taught and learn positive aspects of their cultural heritage such as supportive family roles, respect for others, and interpersonal warmth or harmony. This relationship may be seen as bi-directional: traditional cultural values, in turn, may play an important role in buffering families against individual, family, and community factors that lead to child maltreatment. When these cultural values are absent, core elements of families, ethnic minority and majority, such as warmth, nurturing, and positive discipline may be weakened. Similarly, communities in which positive cultural values are not recognized, supported, and fostered may experience erosion in the fabric that sustains and supports their members.

Thus, the importance of addressing child abuse and neglect across communities cannot be underestimated. Even so, the field of child maltreatment continues to flounder when it comes to understanding cultural differences. As a reflection of this problem, despite decades of known disparities across ethnic groups in children’s representation in the CWS, inequities remain pervasive and persistent, and the etiology of the disparities remains unclear. To address these issues more adequately, child maltreatment research must bring issues of culture and ethnicity to the fore. Such a task is challenging and will require significant changes in the way research is conducted, how ethnicity and culture are defined and measured, and in the recruitment and inclusion of ethnic minority participants. The pervasiveness of child maltreatment across communities and the failure of prevention and intervention efforts to decrease rates of maltreatment substantially demonstrate that this is a compelling mandate.

References


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