CHAPTER 3

The Basis for Cross-cultural Comparisons in Child Maltreatment
3.0. Towards cross-cultural research in child maltreatment

Extant literature shows that there are few cross-cultural studies in the area of child maltreatment. Attempts at cross-cultural reviews on child maltreatment have focused mainly on ethnicity within countries and the comparison of existing data from different studies done in different countries (Elliot & Urquiza, 2006; Korbin, 1991). In a review of studies on child maltreatment, Elliot and Urquiza (2006) addressed issues of ethnicity, culture and child maltreatment. The authors used studies carried out in the USA in which various ethnic groups were represented and also compared rates of maltreatment found in studies carried out in other countries. In their review, Elliot and Urquiza (2006) noted that there were no clear-cut ethnic differences in CSA prevalence within the USA, and importantly also, not across nations and cultures. They suggested that children are sexually abused at relatively comparable rates across cultures, with perhaps minor variations. Despite these important findings, strictly speaking this study does not present cross-cultural data because of the use of different samples and even disparate research methods. In addition, different definitions of terms such as sexual abuse and severity preclude an easy interpretation of similar or divergent findings among nations. Besides, studying different ethnic groups in one country may be different from cross-cultural comparisons.

Cross-cultural variability in child rearing beliefs and behaviours makes it clear that there is neither a universal standard for optimal child care nor a universal standard for child abuse and neglect. This presents a dilemma: on the one hand failure to allow for a cultural perspective in defining child abuse and neglect promotes an ethnocentric position. One’s own set of cultural beliefs and practices are presumed to be preferable and superior to all others. On the other hand, a stance of extreme cultural relativism in which all judgments of (in-)humane treatment of children are suspended in the name of culturally specific rights and norms may be used to justify a lower standard of care for some children (Korbin, 1991). In order to ensure universal optimal care for children, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) should be upheld. Article 19 of this convention seeks to protect the child from all forms of violence, abuse and maltreatment (See appendix). By the end of the year 2009, all nations of the world except the USA and Somali had ratified this convention. The three countries in the present comparative study, Kenya, Zambia and The Netherlands, are therefore bound by the article stated above. Cognizant of this convention, child maltreatment would also include acts of physical punishment to the child.

It is within this framework that we review a few cross-cultural studies that have focused on child physical discipline and later behavioural problems. We review these studies as part of the global problem of child maltreatment because corporal punishment and child physical abuse are related. These two types of interactions with a child are located on different points of a continuum, and although corporal punishment might not always be physical maltreatment, corporal punishment is certainly a risk factor for physical abuse (Gracia & Herrero, 2008a, 2008b).
The impetus to study child physical discipline cross-culturally was borne out of the observation that in the USA, African-American parents used more physical punishment than did Hispanic or European-American parents (Caughy & Fanzini, 2005; Ferrari, 2002; Spearly & Lauderdale, 1983). Compared to other ethnic groups in the USA African-American mothers were more likely to endorse spanking as an effective discipline strategy (Caughy & Fanzini, 2005). Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, and Pettit (1996) found that African-American children were more likely to receive physical discipline than European-American children. Outcomes of physical discipline were found to vary across the different ethnic groups in the USA. Although nonabusive physical discipline was associated with higher externalizing scores for European-American children, there was a tendency towards lower externalizing scores for African-American children who met with physical discipline (Deater-Deckard et al., 1996). The authors attributed this to the fact that African-American children may not view their parents’ physical discipline as an indication of lack of parental warmth and love whereas among European American families, physical discipline may imply an out-of-control parent-centred household. This is likely to have different effects on children who belong to the two ethnicities. Weiss, Dodge, Bates, and Pettit, (1992) however, found that highly deviant physical discipline that was in fact abusive was associated with high externalizing scores for both ethnic groups. This implies that ethnic differences only hold for the non-abusive range of discipline.

According to Jaffee, Caspi, Polo-Tomas, Price and Taylor (2004) physical punishment is different from physical maltreatment. Physical punishment involves the use of physical force to inflict pain but not injury for the purpose of control of the child’s behaviour. It differs from maltreatment because it does not result in significant physical injury. In addition, physical punishment is a normative disciplinary practice among parents of young children, whereas maltreatment is relatively uncommon. Although children’s coercive and disruptive behaviour may provoke physical punishment, it is less likely to elicit maltreatment. According to Jaffee et al. (2004) Physical maltreatment is most likely to be influenced by the characteristics of the perpetrators and by the social context in which they reside. In their UK study of twins, Jaffee et al. (2004) found that physical maltreatment may be largely explained by factors that differ between families, while physical discipline may be explained by factors that differ between and within families Usually when children are subjected to physical maltreatment, it is due to circumstances that are out of their control and which have important implications for developmental outcomes. This therefore implies that regardless of ethnicity the etiology of physical maltreatment lies in the social and economic factors that vary between families and not genetic factors. A child’s genotype may directly or indirectly in combination with the environment increase the likelihood that she/he will engage in disruptive behaviour which may elicit physical punishment but the likelihood for the physical punishment to escalate into maltreatment can be accounted for by environmental factors only.

In a different study Lansford, Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, and Pettit (2004) followed up American children for 11 years from age 5 to age 16 and found that physical discipline was related to externalizing behaviours among both
European-American and African-American adolescents. However, the levels of externalizing behaviours were lower among African-American adolescents than among European-American who met with physical discipline. It is findings of this nature that support the need for cross-cultural investigations. On the basis of these findings (Deater-Deckard et al., 1996; Lansford et al., 2004), Lansford, Chang, Dodge, Malone, Oburu, et al. (2005) posited that the effect of physical discipline on child adjustment may depend on the context in which it is used and the meaning it transpires for the parent and the child. According to the authors, cultural contexts would moderate the effects of parental discipline strategies on child adjustment. This hypothesis was examined in a coordinated study of multiple contexts in six countries which were Italy, China, Thailand, Kenya, India, and the Philippines, in which a total of 336 mother-child dyads participated. This study was designed in order to test cultural normativeness of physical discipline beyond the USA. Based on previous research (see Oburu & Palmerus, 2003) it was expected that physical punishment discipline would be more normative in Kenya. This is because the authors had found that 57% of their sample of Kenyan caregivers used discipline strategies like slapping, tying with a rope, hitting, and kicking as forms of discipline, and 36% of the caregivers used both physical punishment and reasoning. Only 7% had used reasoning without accompanying it with any physical discipline. Awuor and Palmerus (as cited in Lansford et al., 2005) had also found similar results in a different sample of mothers in Kenya. On the other end of the continuum the authors anticipated that Thailand would report the least use of physical discipline. In between, they expected high use of physical punishment in India, the Philippines, and China, in that order. It is worth noting that a significant number of parents who used physical punishment actually engaged in more severe forms of physical discipline like kicking, biting, and hitting with an object.

The results of this study (Lansford et al., 2005) showed that mothers and children in Kenya reported more frequent and normative use of physical discipline than did mothers and children in other countries. Mothers in China and Thailand generally reported less frequent and less normative use of physical discipline. Perceived normativeness of physical discipline, particularly by children moderated the association between experiencing physical discipline and child aggression and anxiety. Thus when physical discipline was considered culturally acceptable, more frequent use of physical discipline was less strongly associated with adverse child outcomes. However, more frequently experiencing physical discipline was associated with higher levels of anxiety regardless of whether physical discipline was considered normative or not. Children who perceived physical discipline as normative had higher levels of aggression regardless of whether they personally experienced high or low levels of physical discipline. Countries with the lowest normative use of physical discipline showed the strongest positive association between mothers’ use of physical discipline and their children’s behaviour problems. It is remarkable however that high physical discipline was associated with more aggression and anxiety in all countries. This implies that although cultural normativeness moderated the relation between parents’ use of physical discipline and child adjustment, the negative effects of physical discipline were apparent regardless of its normativeness.
In a sequel to Lansford et al. (2005), Gershoff et al. (2010) examined physical discipline practices and associations with child behaviours and perceived normativeness in an international sample that consisted of 292 participants drawn from Italy, China, Thailand, Kenya, India, and the Philippines. In this study, Gershoff et al. (2010) found that all discipline strategies were associated with negative outcomes, either in the area of aggression or related to anxiety. The normativeness of physical punishment did moderate this association - although it did not eliminate the negative consequences. In fact more frequent use of corporal punishment was associated with greater behavioural problems in all the cultures that were examined in the study.

The two cross-cultural studies reviewed above (Gershoff et al 2010; Lansford et al, 2005) highlight salient issues with regard to child-rearing across cultures. It is important to note that physical discipline has detrimental outcomes across cultures, regardless of the normativeness of corporal punishment in the specific country or culture. It should also be noted that children all over the world have inalienable rights that parents should safeguard, and most importantly all nations and governments are obliged to protect children’s wellbeing and act in the best interests of the child. Hence the “normativeness” of a practice does not necessarily mean that the practice is acceptable if it is demonstrably harmful to the child. To let individual communities determine what is “normative” and thus good for the child may not be to the best interest of the child. We therefore apply the CRC (1989) as an acceptable standard for the protection of the child, and for determining what should be counted as child maltreatment across cultures.

It is against this background that we investigate childhood physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and witnessing interparental violence and its psychopathological sequelae in Kenya, Zambia and The Netherlands. We expect variation and similarities in prevalence of child maltreatment and its sequelae across the three socio-cultural contexts and therefore adopt a cross-cultural comparative approach for our study (see Kağıtçıbaşı, 2007). In view of the fact that there is paucity of data on cross-cultural research of all forms of child maltreatment, we anticipate that this study will prove useful in attempting to fill knowledge gaps.

3.1. Hypotheses

Only few studies have examined child maltreatment in Africa, and they are insufficient for drawing firm conclusions on the prevalence of child maltreatment on this vast continent. In view of this lack of evidence, this thesis will adopt similar methods, sampling strategies, and operational definitions of the various forms of child maltreatment, for three culturally diverging samples and seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of the various forms of child maltreatment among university students in Kenya, Zambia and The Netherlands as ascertained through self-report measures?
2. Do the prevalence rates of child maltreatment vary significantly across the three countries, and compared to global prevalence rates?

We hypothesize that the prevalence of the various forms of child maltreatment in the three countries will be more or less converging with the global prevalence rates as reported in published studies (for CSA reviews see Finkelhor, 1994; Gorey & Leslie, 1997; Pereda et al. 2009a; 2009b). However, due to socio-cultural factors, we expect that the prevalence rates for Kenya and Zambia will be similar but at the same time that both prevalences will be significantly higher than the rates reported in The Netherlands. We expect this because of cultural norms associated with the acceptance of physical punishment for children, and prevalent poverty that would make it difficult for parents to attend to their children’s emotional and educational needs hence leading to neglect. In addition, we anticipate higher prevalence rates for childhood sexual abuse in the Kenyan and Zambian sample because of poverty that leads to young girls and boys having sexual relations with older partners for economic gain and the adolescent rites of passage to adulthood that in some ways encourage sexual activity in pubertal and adolescent youth (Lalor, 2008; Plummer & Njuguna, 2009). We will also seek to answer the following questions:

3. What are the negative psychological outcomes associated with the various forms of maltreatment?

4. Are the outcomes of the various forms of child maltreatment culturally specific?

In this thesis, we hypothesize that the outcomes of the various forms of maltreatment will not vary significantly across the different samples. This is because various studies that have examined the outcomes of child maltreatment in different ethnic groups have found that maltreatment in childhood is associated with negative psychological sequelae regardless of race. Even when socioeconomic status and other family adversities have been adjusted for, the relation between maltreatment and negative psychological outcomes usually remains significant.

5. Is PTSD symptomatology a significant mediator of the association between the various forms of child maltreatment and adverse psychological outcomes?

The mechanism by which child maltreatment leads to a variety of psychopathological outcomes is of interest to researchers and clinicians as well. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a common outcome in a significant proportion of individuals with such histories (Breire 2002). Breire and Runtz (1988) suggested that the association between childhood sexual abuse and adult psychopathology may be explained by a mediator that was either present at the time of the abuse or that developed as a direct result subsequently. PTSD develops immediately after traumatic events (Molnar et al., 2001) causing states of hyperarousal, avoidance and re-experiencing. We hypothesize that PTSD will
mediate the associations between the various forms of maltreatment and the psychological outcomes albeit differentially. We speculate that it will be a more potent mediator in case of sexual and physical abuse, and less potent in case of neglect, because of the more subtle nature of neglect compared to CSA and CPA.