

Evaluating  
the  
Cultural  
Sensitivity  
of Child  
Abuse  
Research:  
Sampling  
Issues

by  
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Research into all forms of child maltreatment varies widely in the quality of its attention to the effects of culture. This article provides guidelines to help readers evaluate the cultural sensitivity of research on child abuse. In the interests of space, this discussion is limited to key questions of culture and sampling.

**Identifying the Sample**

Readers should first check the article in question to see which cultural groups are being discussed. Even today, studies are published that fail to report the culture of the sample (e.g. Ligezinska et al, 1996). Studies that do not identify the culture of the participants are of limited use because readers cannot know to whom the results are applicable. A research report that fails to identify the cultures of the participants should be as unthinkable as one that fails to identify the gender or age of the participants. Child abuse research cannot be divorced from the culture of the families involved, including their child-raising beliefs and practices, their relationship to wider systems such as schools and social services, and their comfort in participating in research

Early research on child abuse often used all-White samples to "control for ethnicity" (Herman, 1981), engaging in what Hardy (1993) has labeled the "conventional theoretical myth of sameness." This involved acting upon the mistaken belief that all families are the same, irrespective of race, class or culture, and using White families as the model. The results of a study consisting of members of only one cultural group must be assumed to be applicable to that cultural group alone, unless there is compelling evidence as to why it is possible to extrapolate the results to members of different groups.

As long as it does not lead to over-generalization to other groups, culture-specific (monocultural) research can be useful. It is more apt to detect within-group differences than cross-cultural research. In-depth culture-specific research can result in information-rich descriptions of the phenomenon being studied, and it may be especially well-suited to detecting vulnerabilities, strengths, and the sequence of events related to abuse for members of a specific cultural group. For example, a study on Puerto Ricans and sexual abuse (Fontes, 1993) discussed barriers to disclosure for Puerto Rican children, leading to guidelines for culture-specific prevention and intervention programs. Again, however, caution must be taken before the results of monocultural research are applied to members of a different cultural group

Readers should pay careful attention to the terms used to label groups in research reports. When ethnically different groups within a nation are compared in cross-national studies, the groups are usually sorted according to the demographic labels of "race" or "Nationality," respectively. It is assumed that "race" and "nationality" are constructs that make sense when studying family violence. However, this is problematic. "To include people of similar skin color in one category is to suggest that genetic similarities rather than culturally bonded belief systems, customs, and behavior are the predictors that best explain violence" (Urquiza & Wyatt, 1994). Similarly, it is ludicrous to presume that being from a certain corner of the globe itself would predispose someone to behave in a particular way towards members of their family

In cross-national and cross-racial comparisons, the actually underlying construct is usually "culture" Here I am referring to culture in its broadest sense, as an encompassing "expression of self that is both objective and subjective that subsumes racial and ethnic rituals, symbols, language, and general ways of behaving" (Dilworth-Anderson, Burton & Johnson, 1993, p. 628). It is important to acknowledge that culture evolves continually and is partially shaped by contemporary and historical contextual factors including oppression and discrimination. Group cultural differences are most meaningful when presented with

ample contextual information to help explain those differences. For example, a compelling study on corporal punishment in the Caribbean not only discussed the people's beliefs and behaviors, but also the history of slavery that may have partially shaped these (Payne, 1989).

Broad general cultural terms like "Hispanics" and "Asians" often obscure the differences among the widely varied groups

that fall under these general names. These categorization problems have been called "ethnic lumping" (Fontes, 1995). The category Hispanics, for example, may include diverse peoples of Central and South American and the American southwest, descendants of indigenous, European, and African peoples, with differing degrees of acculturation, social classes and dominant languages. In one study, the category Hispanics may consist mostly of low income Puerto Ricans who are dominant in Spanish and spend equal amounts of time on the Island and on the Mainland. In another, the same label may be used to refer to people whose ancestors have always lived in the parts of the United States that were once under Mexican control (e.g. Texas) and who speak no Spanish

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whatsoever. And in a third study, the category Hispanics may include people of diverse geographic origins, but exclude those who do not read in English because the study instrument was administered in English only. Researchers should make every effort to label the groups appropriately (e.g. call them Cuban-Americans rather than Hispanics) and provide sufficient contextual information for readers to be able to judge for themselves the transferability of the findings to other peoples

## Looking for Inter-Group Differences

When researchers pose questions in terms of group differences, they risk exaggerating the differences among groups while minimizing their similarities. Inter-group comparisons can also lead to ignoring the variation within any single group, engaging in what Hardy (1993) has called the contemporary theoretical myth of sameness. (p.647). Using the typical line of thinking, a report comparing Anglo, Hopi and Navajo mothers states:

In this analysis, each group was treated as an aggregate sample, rather than as a collection of individuals, in order to establish overall behavioral frequencies. A basic assumption here was that within-group difference would be minimal. (Callaghan, 1981, p. 115-131)

In fact, intracultural groups differences may be large, and may be of greater interest conceptually than intercultural group differences. For instance, a study of abusing and non-abusing parents within a specific cultural group could detect strengths that would then translate easily into culturally sensitive prevention and intervention programs.

The mistaken notion that racial or cultural groups are monolithic can pose problems in studies of child abuse among Whites as well. For example, Busby, Glenn, Steggell and Adamson (1993), describe the sample in their study on victims of physical and sexual abuse as 95% White, composed of people who sought therapy at a center at Brigham Young University. The authors fail to mention the religious background of the participants. Given that the study takes place at a Mormon university in Utah, it would be important to know if most of the participants were Mormon, and how this might influence the results. Without this important piece of contextual information, the readers are led to assume the results would apply to all Whites. Because they are the racially dominant group, Whites are often seen as culture-free or without ethnicity. When studied in greater depth, specific groups of White people are found to be highly influenced by cultural and systemic factors (e.g. for discussions of sexual abuse among Anglo-Americans and Jews, respectively, see Schmidt 1995, and Featherman, 1995)

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Important recent research on cultural differences in child abuse does not simply discuss rates of prevalence or severity of a given behavior in a group. Rather, it adopts a social constructionist paradigm that sees behaviors related to child abuse as resulting from culture and the social processes that affect individuals and members of groups differently — not as natural, essential characteristics of any individual or group. For example, a recent study of sexually abused Black

and Latino boys sought to uncover whether previously documented differences in psychological outcomes for the boys from these groups was related to ethnic differences in the circumstances of the abuse, or to different ways of responding to the stress of the abuse (Moisan, Sanders-Philips & Moisan, 1997). This represents a crucial step in teasing out the rea-

son for group differences. In other words, cultural difference is not somehow inherent in the bloodstream of various groups, but rather emerges from specific practices, values, and histories that can themselves be studied.

## Conclusion

As I have outlined here, careful attention to the composition and labeling of the sample is key to culturally sensitive child abuse research. Other issues that merit consideration include: definitions of the problem, composition of the research team, potential harm and benefit of the research, fit of the instrument, and the accountability of the researchers to the people who are being studied (for discussions of related issues see Abney, 1996; Fontes, 1997; and Urquiza & Wyatt, 1994). Research in child maltreatment is moving in the direction of being more culturally sensitive, but still has far to go. I hope this article will encourage readers, researchers, and journal reviewers and editors to demand higher standards of cultural sensitivity in child abuse research.

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## LAW

### Expert testimony on children's suggestibility: Should it be admitted?

by Brian K. Holmgren, JD

There is a growing trend in child sexual abuse litigation toward admitting defense expert testimony on children's memory and the effect of suggestive interviewing techniques. Such testimony is frequently based on the research and writing of Stephen Ceci and Maggie Bruck. In their book, *Jeopardy in the courtroom: A scientific analysis of children's testimony*, Ceci and Bruck argue that expert testimony is needed to inform judges and jurors of the factors that may influence a child to make a false allegation (Ceci & Bruck, 1995).

Ceci and Bruck's arguments are based on their belief that there is "highly consistent" (p 299) research on children's suggestibility. Although they refer to legal decisions and evidentiary rules governing the admission of expert testimony and scientific evidence, they make no attempt to apply these principles. They simply assume such evidence is admissible in forensic settings.

Whether such expert testimony should be admitted must be analyzed under the evidentiary standards for expert testimony and scientific evidence. In *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals* (1993), the United States Supreme Court analyzed the admissibility of scientific testimony or evidence

under the Federal Rules of Evidence. First, the Court held that scientific testimony or evidence must be reliable and relevant. The Court offered several criteria for determining the reliability of scientific testimony or evidence: (1) whether the theory or technique can be and has been tested; (2) whether the theory or technique has been subjected to peer review and published; (3) the technique's known or potential rate of error; (4) the existence and maintenance of standards controlling a technique's operation, and (5) whether the theory or technique is generally accepted in the relevant scientific community. Scientific knowledge requires more than subjective belief or unsupported speculation (p. 590).

*Daubert's* relevancy standard requires that the expert's testimony must be sufficiently tied to the facts of the case to assist the jury. A scientific technique or theory may be perfectly valid, yet inadmissible, if

inapplicable to the facts in issue. Finally, the Court noted that expert evidence can be both powerful and misleading because of the difficulty in evaluating it (p. 595). Therefore, even if an expert is testifying to scientific knowledge, and that knowledge will assist the jury, the judge should nevertheless consider excluding the testimony if its prejudicial impact—the extent to which it overwhelms a lay jury—substantially outweighs its evidentiary value.

Research on children's memory and suggestibility has been subjected to peer review and has been published. This criterion under *Daubert* appears to be met. Does this research satisfy the remaining *Daubert* criteria? Has the theory or technique been tested?

Although a substantial body of research exists regarding children's suggestibility, significant gaps remain in the scientific knowledge. The studies most

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frequently cited are on preschool children (Ceci & Bruck, 1995), yet the majority of children testifying in court are years older (Whitcomb et al., 1994). Because the research typically finds significant age differences, research on 3- to 5-year-olds has no direct application to older children. Nevertheless, experts in a num-

ber of cases have inappropriately applied research involving younger children to older victims (*Commonwealth v. Allen*, 1996; *People v. Michael M.*, 1994; *United States v. Geiss*, 1990). Ceci and Bruck emphasize that preschool children are particularly vulnerable to suggestion, but downplay the significance of age differences and the paucity of research involving older children when discussing whether older children are suggestible (Ceci & Bruck, 1995, pp. 236-237). They make no attempt to clarify the point that experts testifying on suggestibility effects cannot apply research involving preschoolers to older children.

Most abuse involves a trusted family member or caregiver known to the child, so that the child's emotional bond with the abuser and others involved is strong. Such a bond makes it difficult for the child to

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