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It should not hurt to be a child : prevalence of child maltreatment across the globe

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General introduction

The Prevalence of Child Maltreatment in the World

Given the devastating consequences of child maltreatment (e.g., Gilbert et al., 2009) it is important to know how often child maltreatment occurs. This is especially salient when seen in the light of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) in which the 194 ratifying countries state that they would will? take all possible measures in order to protect children from maltreatment.

To date, hundreds of studies with estimated prevalence rates of child maltreatment have been published. The reported prevalence rate estimations show a wide range, from nearly 0% (i.e., Raiha & Soma, 1997; Sibert et al., 2002) to more than 90% (i.e., Meston, Heiman, Trapnell, & Carlin, 1999; Milner, Robertson, & Rogers, 1990). Thus, it remains unclear how many children's lives are touched by maltreatment. Part of the variance in prevalence rates may reflect real differences in the occurrence of child maltreatment, for example due to differences between types of maltreatment, between genders, or due to variation in geographical origin of the samples. Part of the variance may also be due to design features such as how child maltreatment was measured or what kinds of samples were used. With the aim of unraveling the causes of variance in prevalence rates, we conducted a series of comprehensive meta-analyses on the prevalence of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and of physical and emotional neglect. The results are presented in this thesis.

Types of Maltreatment

A general description of the different types of maltreatment can be found in the Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention (WHO, 1999; see Appendix A in Chapter 6). This report describes *sexual abuse* as the involvement of children in sexual activities that they do not fully understand, are unable to give informed consent to, for which they are not developmentally prepared, or that violate the standards of the society in which these children live. *Physical abuse* is defined as the infliction of potential or actual physical harm by a caregiver caused by interactions or lack of interactions that are reasonably in control of this caregiver. The description of *emotional abuse* includes the failure to provide a developmentally appropriate, supportive environment that allows the child to develop a stable and full range of emotional and social competencies, according to the child's personal potentials and in the context of the society in which the child grows up. Again, these acts should be reasonably within the control of the caregiver. *Neglect*, including physical, emotional, and educational neglect, is described as the failure, within the limits of the caregivers' resources, to provide for the development of the child in all domains including health, education, emotional development, nutrition, shelter, and safe living conditions.

Aims and Outline of the Thesis

Based on a total of 244 publications in which 577 prevalence rates were reported for the various types of maltreatment, we conducted a series of meta-analyses in which we calculated the global overall prevalence for sexual abuse (*Chapter 2*), physical abuse (*Chapter 3*), emotional abuse (*Chapter 4*), and physical and emotional neglect (*Chapter 5*), also investigating the influences of sample characteristics and design features. In *Chapter 6* the results of the series of meta-analyses are synthesized, allowing us to compare prevalence rates and to find out whether study characteristics exert similar or differential effects on the prevalence rates of different types of maltreatment. In *Chapter 6* we also provide an overview of the body of maltreatment research, mapping the distribution of studies over time, types of maltreatment, and continents of origin of samples. Thus, in the next chapters we provide a unique overview of child maltreatment prevalence rates, and examine how many children across the world suffer from family violence or neglect.

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