

The Intergenerational Cycle of Child Maltreatment in Macao SAR

Caroline Chi Fan Ng Vitor Manuel Dos Santos Teixeira*

Abstract

Background Child maltreatment is a global problem that leads to serious life-long consequences to both the victims and the socioeconomic well-beings of the communities (OECD, 2023). It is a phenomenon existing in Macao and there are some evidence that it is rising. Objectives of this study are to understand child maltreatment conditions in Macao, to identify its causes and to evaluate whether there is an intergeneration cycle; based on findings to propose recommendations to fight against and break the eventual intergeneration cycle of child maltreatment.

Methods A qualitative research was adopted using a semi-structured interview with questions around perceptions and beliefs related to child maltreatment. There were eight-volunteered participants ageing 30+ to 52 years old. The interviews were scripted and analysed through thematic analysis.

Results Three key findings are derived from this research: 1. Child maltreatment exists in Macao and some evidences showed that it is rising; 2. There is an intergeneration cycle of child maltreatment in Macao; and 3. There is the need for improvement of current system (legal, education and clinical) in Macao to stop/prevent child maltreatment and enhance well-being of children/adolescents.

Conclusions/Recommendations Different recommendations were made to address these key findings both at a Legal/Policy and community levels and also for the counselling intervention with children and their families. It seems important to develop a trauma-informed care community and a long-term systematic plan in terms of training and providing healing professional services to respond and address its escalating needs.

Keywords: Child Maltreatment, Intergeneration Cycle of Child Maltreatment, Macao

* Faculty of Health Science, University of Saint Joseph Macao

Introduction

Child Maltreatment is not only a global problem that leads to serious life-long consequences to the victims, it also poses negative impacts to the socioeconomic well-beings of different communities (OECD, 2023). According to the research conducted by Fang and colleagues (Fang et al., 2015) in China, it showed that the disability-adjusted life-years loss (DALYs) of the victims was estimated as 1.7% of China's GDP in 2010. Meanwhile, numerous researches showed that child maltreatment might be inherited (Pittner et al., 2019); exposure to child maltreatment is associated with an elevated risk of maltreatment victimization of one's own children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

Macao, as a part of China, thus child maltreatment might also negatively impact its socioeconomic well-being. According to an article published by the Union of Catholic Asian News on August, 2022 (UCA News Reporter, 2022), the office of the Secretary for Security of Macao had released the crime statics for the first half of the year, and Macao had experienced a sharp rise in child abuse, the rate is 70% higher than that of the whole year of 2021. With this concerning rising trend of child maltreatment in Macao, yet research around this phenomenon and its impacts to both the affected individuals and socioeconomic well-beings is very rare, hindering Macao's preventive capability to stop child maltreatment. Thus the objectives of this study are to understand child maltreatment in Macao, to identify its causes and to evaluate whether there is an intergeneration cycle, then propose recommendations to fight against it.

Lecture review

Child maltreatment, drawing increasing attention, was firstly discovered in the United States of America in 1874 through a famous court case of an eight-year-old, Mary Ellen Wilson, who was found being beaten and starved by her stepmother by a church social worker Etta Wheeler (Pearson, 2011). Attention attracted by this case had eventually led to the founding of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in various parts of the world including the United States of America in 1871 and the United Kingdom in 1883. By mid-twentieth century, distinct and professional child protection services had been established throughout the global north; while history of child maltreatment and protection in the global south went back only to the latter half of the twentieth century (Jabeen, 2013).

1. Definition of child maltreatment

Child maltreatment does not have an universal consented definition, it is very much a legal matter defined by the law of the states/countries, while Physical abuse, Emotional Abuse, Sexual Abuse and Neglect are considered as the four main forms of child maltreatment.

Referring to the World Health Organization (WHO) consultation on child abuse prevention in 1999 (World Health Organization, 1999), the four main forms of child maltreatment are defined as follows:

Physical abuse is defined as actual or potential physical harm resulted from interaction or lack of interaction, which is reasonably within the parent/caregiver's control, and it may be a single or repeated incidents (World Health Organization, 1999).

Sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity which is unlawful, or, although not illegal, to which a child is unable to give informed consent (World Health Organization [WHO],1999).

Emotional abuse defined as failure of parent or caregiver to provide a developmentally appropriate and supportive environment to the child in which the child can develop a stable and full range of emotional and social competencies to her or his personal potential (World Health Organization [WHO],1999).

Neglect refers to the failure of the parent/caregiver to provide development of the child in all aspects in the context of resources reasonably available, or has a high probability of causing harm to the child's physical, mental and social development. This include failure to properly supervise and protect the child from harm as much as it is feasible (World Health Organization [WHO],1999).

While in Macao, couple articles around protection of children/adolescents from maltreatment had been stipulated under its Penal Code in 1995 (Macao SAR Government, Official Press, Penal Code, 1995), which legally defined what constitute child maltreatment. Article 146 and its amendment stipulated in 2016 serve to protect children/adolescents from physical and emotional abuse, it states that physical abuse, mental mistreatment and cruel treatment to children are prohibited. Article 166 and its amendment stipulated in 2017 to Article 170 serve to protect children below 14 years old from being sexually abuse or exploited by adult. Article 242 serves to protect children from being neglected, it states that violation of caregivers' obligation to provide basic needs to children/adolescent is prohibited and subjected to penalty. In addition to the above, Article 241 serves to protect children from abduction, and Article 285 serves to protect children below 16 or mentally incapable person from exploitative use of begging.

2. Intergeneration cycle of child maltreatment

Since last century, numerous theories have been advanced trying to explain why people behave as they do from different perspectives, and the most prevalent ones have been cited as follows to enlighten the understanding of this phenomenon.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that the intergenerational transmission is a result of learning through observation and imitation from one's prime role models, and in most cases, they are one's parents. This theory proposed that if an individual experienced maltreatment like abusive or neglectful parenting, he/she may replicate them with his/her own offspring believing that these learned behaviours are acceptable and effective (Font et al., 2020).

Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) views the intergenerational transmission as the result of multiple influences of the individual's ecological systems - Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem; and the behavioural pattern like child maltreatment could be due to specific risk factors or pathways presented to the individual in his/her ecological system of development (Font et al., 2020).

The transactional theory (Sameroff, 2009) suggests that the bidirectional interplay between the individuals and the contexts may foster the intergeneration of abusive behaviour like child maltreatment, as the case of a parent-child relationship dominated by stressful and defensive reactive parenting and maladaptive coping responses of the child; and also the potentiating risk factors associated with abusive behaviours like attitudes toward maltreatment within the individuals' cultures, local communities, etc. (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 2015) postulates that if the parents or caregivers failed to provide necessary care and sensitivity to the child's needs, as the case when early maltreatment occurs, the affected individual will struggle to develop healthy attachment into adulthoods, and this may increase the individual's likelihood of abusive behaviour as adult (McCluskey, 2000).

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1986) proposes that intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment are learned beliefs and attitudes that the individuals witness around them and are culture specific. Like corporal punishment which in some cultures, is defined as an acceptable and effective child disciplinary behaviour (Agathonos-Georgopoulou, H., 2003), while in other cultures, this constitutes as child abuse.

Psychosocial Theory (Erikson, E. H., 1950) proposes that individuals' development rely on eight stages of psychosocial crises extended from birth through old age, through which the individuals' turning points in their relationships and feelings about themselves, failure to nurture in its due time will hinder the rest of the individual's potential. Like if an individual experienced violence or early child maltreatment may lead to the development of insecurity, identities' confusions, and profound impacts in later stages of the individual's

life, and this may also increase the likelihood of the individual to engage in violent behaviour, such as child maltreatment as adult (Wurdeman, 2015) .

Meanwhile, numerous empirical researches with the attempt to explain the phenomenon of perpetuation of child maltreatment over generations, however, current evidences are still considered as woefully inadequate.

Among the empirical researches, one hypothesis proposed to account for the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment under the theoretical framework of Bandura's social learning theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), it assumes that children learn their aggressive or violent behaviours from their physical punitive parents, through patterns of reinforcement or observation and imitation (Muller et al., 1995).

Ireland & Smith (Ireland & Smith, 2009), and Al Dosari et al.'s (Al Dosari, M. N., Ferwana, M., Abdulmajeed, I., Aldossari, K. K., & Al-Zahrani, J. M., 2017) researches had tested this hypothesis, both studies reveal evidences that adhere to the theoretical framework of Social Learning Theory that individuals exposed to child maltreatment or witness violence posed greater risk of being abuser in adulthood; and their learnings from their significant others - parents - played an imperative role in shaping their beliefs that corporal punishment was an acceptable way to discipline their children.

Methodology

This study is with focus on individual factors, in particular perception and belief. It has adopted qualitative interview and thematic analysis as its research instruments; while the participants were randomly selected from a pool of 781 parents of Macao children aged 6-11, who had previously participated in the ASEBA project and had given consent to be contacted for future studies. The 8 participants of this study are comprised of 1 male 7 female, aged 30 plus to 52, with junior high to universities education background, and half of them are currently working parents. Five research questions as follow are researched through the interview: 1. How parents of Macao children/adolescents perceive as child maltreatment, 2. How parents of Macao children/adolescents perceive that are the child maltreatment conditions in Macao, 3. How parents of Macao children/adolescents believe in the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment, 4. What parents of Macao Children/adolescents perceive as the long-term impacts on victim of child maltreatment, and 5. What are the actions proposed by the parents of Macao children/adolescents to stop/prevent child maltreatment and enhance their well-beings.

Presentation and discussion of results

Scripts of the eight semi-structured individual interviews were cross analysed through thematic analysis to identify common themes which were presented and discussed in more details as follows.

1. Perception of parents of child maltreatment in Macao

Behaviors perceived by the participants that constituted child maltreatment could be grouped into four main forms - Physical Abuse, Sexual abuse, Mental Abuse and Neglect.

Physical abuse was perceived by the participants as aggressive or violent behaviours towards children/adolescents over a period of time resulted in their physical injuries, this included corporal punishment only when it involved use of tool and with abusive intention. Eddie, one of the participants, stated that his parents had beaten him and his siblings when they were young, however, they did this with good intention of wanting them to be good, thus it was not physical abuse. Meanwhile, corporal punishment has not been explicitly stated as prohibited in childrearing according to the law in Macao.

Sexual abuse was perceived as an adult engages in sexual activities with a child with pressure or force, and this perception aligned to those of parents in China according to the study conducted by Xie and colleagues (Xie et al., 2016), this alignment might be attributed to the fact that both participants are within same cultural context. In addition, this perception of the participants is supported by the related child protection law in Macao of what constitutes as child sexual abuse.

Emotional abuse was perceived as the caregiver's failure to respond to the child's physiological and emotional needs, and was acknowledged as a form of child maltreatment that the victim would have difficulties to report with substantiated evidences to prove the claim. Moreover, according to the law in Macao, neglect the emotional needs of children has not been explicitly stated as a violation of caregiver's obligation.

Neglect was perceived as failure of the caregivers to regard children's feeling through excessive criticism, labelling or humiliating them in public. Hana, one of the participants had shared her son's personal experiences of being labelled and thus negatively treated in his school. However, these types of negative treatments to children are not legally defined as child maltreatment in Macao.

2. Participants' perception of child maltreatment conditions in Macao

All participants perceived child maltreatment conditions in Macao was gradually improving and attributed this to the promulgation of child protection law in Macao (Macao

SAR Government, Official Press, Penal Code, 1995). One of the participants, Betty, stated that corporal punishment did not happen nowadays in school as it constituted as child maltreatment for teacher to corporal punished their students. According to the children database published by the Macao Social Welfare Bureau (Social Welfar Bureau Macao, 2022), reported cases of domestic violence has been decreasing, while reported cases of child sexual abuse has been escalating sharply from 6 cases in year 2000 to 27 cases in year 2022. This demonstrated the needs of continuous and stronger efforts to fight against child maltreatment in Macao.

3. Parents' belief in the intergeneration cycle of child maltreatment

Two-third of the participants believed in the intergeneration cycle of child maltreatment. The participants believed that even though they might not copied their parents' abusive behaviours, it did not imply that the other individual would not replicate and apply same to their own offspring. And this belief of the parent participants is in sync with the explanation of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1986).

4. Parents' perception of long-term impacts on victims of child maltreatment

All participants perceived that child maltreatment would have long term negative consequences on the development and mental health of the victim, such as cognitive distortion, negative personalities, disrupted relationship building skills, and these would hinder the individual from establishing positive long term relationship with others. This perception of the participants aligned to the explanation of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 2015) and Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

5. Proposed actions to fight against child maltreatment in Macao

Participants had proposed to suspend the grade-retention system for primary students which is currently applicable to students from primary five onward; they also perceived the current education system and learning environment as rigid and with priority focused at academic performance only, this added to the limited resources allocated to release adolescents' stresses, all these were considered to impact children/adolscents from development to their full potentials. The participants also proposed to make it compulsory for school to provide more education around child maltreatment to both parents and students, and at the same time, to increase penalty for abusers as current ones were perceived as too light to have sufficient deterrent effect.

Results of the study

Three key findings are identified from this study, they are as below:

1. Child maltreatment exists in Macao and some evidences showed that it is rising

In terms of Physical Abuse, corporal punishment is still in practice and considered as a normative way to discipline children, while it has not been explicitly stated as prohibited in childrearing according to the law in Macao. Reported cases of Sexual Abuse, Emotional Abuse and Neglect might not reflect the actual situation due to reluctances or difficulties for the victim and their families to report. Meanwhile, there are other forms of negative treatments to children, such as labelling, excessive criticism, etc., but all of these are not legally defined as child maltreatment in Macao.

2. An intergeneration cycle of child maltreatment exists in Macao

There is an intergeneration cycle of child maltreatment in Macao, and learning through repeated pattern of observation, internalization and replication of one's abusive/punitive parents, is identified as the main contributor to this phenomena. However, it does not imply that all victims would turn to be perpetrators, as ample researches showed that some victims would not abuse their own children.

3. Need for improvement of current system (legal, education and clinical) to stop/prevent child maltreatment and enhance well-being of children/adolescents.

Proposals are put forward to improve current system of legal, education and clinical, such as improving the reporting system to ease difficulties for the victims to report and seek for earlier intervention, review and adjust current education system and learning environment for children, and advance professional mental healing services to address the escaping public needs.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Different recommendations were made to address these key findings both at a Legal/Policy and community levels, and also for the counselling intervention with children and their families.

1. Legal/Policy

It is recommended that it might be time for the legal legislative bureau to revisit the child protection articles, redefine those with ambiguities and make what constitute child maltreatment as clear as possible to both the public and legal related task force. Meanwhile, have a Help-Supporting System in place, which would not rely heavily on the initiatives of the victims to report, and one that also takes into consideration the feasibility of young children victims to report especially those abusive events happened at home or other organizations, and the abusers are their caregivers.

2. Education

An ideal learning environment should be one which enriches children's learning experiences, encourage creativities and exploration of curiosities. In addition, while the effectiveness of grade-retention system is subjected to further study, it is recommended that the education related bureau to review, weight the cost and benefits, and make necessary adjustments to the current education system and learning environment for children.

3. Clinical/Role of Counselling

In terms of prevention, public awareness of child maltreatment plays a role, however, their collaboration and engagement in fighting against it is more essential. Referencing to the studies of Trauma Informed Practice (Matlin, S. L. et al., 2019) in western developed countries, Macao has the potential to develop its own Trauma Sensitive Community, bring in its stakeholders from various community sectors to develop collaborative effort to prevent/stop child maltreatment. In terms of solution, as ample researches and evidences demonstrated that earlier intervention can significantly reduce further complication, decrease recovery time, improve outcomes for both the victim and their families. It is recommended for the Macao SAR government to have a longer-term and systematic training system in place to train and provide mental healing professionals to address this public needs.

Limitation/Suggestions for further study

This study, being a qualitative research and with a low participation rate, and as it is a level one study of a boarder research around child care/protection in Macao, it is recommended to develop a quantitative research with questionnaire as a follow up in order to reach out to a boarder population.

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