

A critique of the social constructionist and relativistic cultural conception of child abuse

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Abstract

Some social scientists and philosophers tend to think that 'child abuse' is a socially constructed and culturally relativistic term than an objective phenomenon. This stems from the divergent cultural views of what characterize abuses. This work argues that child abuse necessarily should not be considered as a social construct. Using the textual analytic and critical methods of philosophizing, the work explores a few relevant but intriguing facts of child abuse and more importantly the challenges connected with socially constructed and culturally relativistic conceptions of this phenomenon. The paper submits that; if humans could appeal to 'nature eye-view' they could perceive the natural bonding relationship which culminates in the congenial protection of the young by parents; hence, would agree that any aberration of such relationship would constitute abuse. This work would engage readers to understand child abuse as a prevalent cross-cultural reality, and to that extent, instigate them to condemn it wherever it occurs.

Keywords:

Child abuse; cultural relativism; social construct; nature eye-view.

1 INTRODUCTION

Child abuse, as a concept, appears easy to understand in terms of straightforward meaning. But what constitutes the abuse evokes divergent social and ethical (philosophical) problems. Thus, child abuse becomes both a sociological and ethical issue. It is sociological because it occurs in societies and provokes social questions, problems, and sometimes condemnation and sanctions. It is ethical and philosophical because it evokes moral issues on the rightness or wrongness, or goodness or badness of such actions. Ordinarily, a child could be said to be abused when he/she is exposed to harm; or harmed physically or emotionally via any form of mistreatment either by the parent(s), guardian, or stranger. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (2014) crowns this common conception of child abuse thus: "The willful infliction of pain and suffering on children through physical, sexual, or emotional mistreatment." This definition seems quite banal, clear, and perhaps direct to the point on face value. But given specific societal, cultural, organizational, and professional values and norms, the conceptualization and understanding of the phenomenon of child abuse throw up many conceptual challenges, to the extent that many social scientists do conclude that child abuse is socially constructed.

By 'social construct,' it is meant that the society fixes 'abuse' or what constitutes abuse in question (Wallace & Wolf, 2012). In other words, whatever the community accepts as abuse would stand as abuse for them. This means that what may be regarded as abuse in one society may not be so in another society. This quandary makes child abuse appear as a non-objective or an unreal evil that could be universally understood and possibly condemned. It is this difficulty in the relative understanding of child abuse that this paper sees as the relativistic cultural disposition. Given this problematic, the paper sets out to argue that if humans were to appeal to the 'nature-eye-view' of the natural bonding relationship between parent and child, everyone would come to understand that what constitutes 'child abuse' is objectively real, no matter the society involved. Hence the phenomenon is not merely a socially constructed idea.

The scope of this study spans 'child abuse' as a concept and as a fact of human history. In this regard, a few classifications of child abuse shall be explained, and its conceptualization from a few cultures exposed. Since child abuse is a cross-cultural or general phenomenon in diverse ways, it is difficult to pin down a specific geographical location as a universe of discourse. However, the work shall allude to a few developed and developing societies, respectively.

2 CONCEPTUALIZING 'CHILD ABUSE,' 'CULTURAL RELATIVISM,' AND 'SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM'

2.1 Child Abuse

'Child abuse' has been defined in several ways, depending on legal, societal, organizational, and professional conceptual schemes. For example, child abuse has been defined as "an act or failure to act, on the part of a parent or caretaker that results in the death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation of a child, or which places the child in imminent risk of serious harm." (*legal-dictionary. The freedictionary.com*). Here it could be seen that the emphasis is on the action or inaction towards a child that leads to serious emotional or physical harm or death. The implication here is that there is some harm that may not be adjudged by law as serious, hence it could not be taken as abuse. However, it should be noted that the interpretation of child abuse and sanctioning by-laws have often pitted the right of the child to be free from harm, on the one hand, and the right of parents or families' privacy and discipline of their children devoid of government interference, on the other hand. This then means that what the law sees as abuse may not be seen as such by the family, and probably the society in question.

Meanwhile, the definition of child abuse by a United Kingdom-based organization - the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) would be instructive to us. They define child abuse as "any action by another person - adult or child that causes significant harm to a child. It can be physical, sexual, or emotional, but can just as often be about a lack of love, care, and attention." (www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect). The organization further outlines various types of abuse to include-domestic abuse, sexual abuse/exploitation, neglect, physical abuse and bullying, emotional abuse, female genital mutilation, child trafficking wrong grooming, harmful

sexual behavior; that is, where the child develops harmful sexual behavior that turns around to harm him/her and others, etc. The definition of child abuse by NSPCC is apt. It shows that it involves action by an adult or another child that might significantly harm another child. Furthermore, it emphasizes the phrase *significantly harmful*; and shows that a child could abuse himself/herself when he develops, for example, harmful sexual behavior. The qualification of harm with the adverb *significantly* (for such to be accepted as abuse), just like in the case of the term 'serious' as noted earlier, is what brings about the divergent views of what constitutes abuse; thus, leading to relative dispositions in cultures.

However, it should be noted that most definitions, either by federal or state agencies or even non-governmental organizations pertaining to child welfare, do not primarily include harm caused by other people such as acquaintances or strangers as child abuse. The emphasis is on harm caused to a child by a parent or other caregivers. In this vein, the Child Welfare Information Gateway sees child abuse as "any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm." (<https://www.childwelfare.gov>). The challenge in limiting abuse to only the harm done by parents and caregivers is that it could exclude some forms of child abuse, for example, sexual abuse (rape) or child trafficking, etc., which is mostly perpetrated by strangers. Also, the fact that states are entitled to provide their own definition of child abuse, though within the minimum standards set by federal law, complicates the objective understanding of child abuse and, to that extent, frustrates any collective remedy of the evil of the phenomenon.

2.2 Cultural Relativism

Relativism generally is the belief that there can be no absolute or universal standard of truth, ideas, laws, norms, position, etc., that apply to everybody in every place and time. The anchor point of relativism is that all moral, social, legal norms and values, etc., are relative to the society in which they operate. Dupre (2009), in this vein, makes the point that relativism suggests that "we can only get an intellectual grasp on reality from within our conceptual framework determined by a complex combination of factors including our culture and history." Cultural relativism is most times linked with or seen as synonymous with ethical relativism, which holds that there are no universally valid moral principles. In essence, all moral principles are valid relative to culture or individual choice" (Pojman, 2011). Pojman classifies cultural relativism as a type of "conventionalist ethical relativism," which he sub-divides into two theses: a diversity thesis and a dependency thesis. The diversity thesis holds that what is considered morally right and wrong varies from society to society so that all societies generally accept no moral principle. The dependency thesis holds that all moral principles derive their validity from cultural acceptance.

The import of both the diversity and dependency theories is that a society's customs and ideas should be described objectively and understood in the context of that society's problems, opportunities, and challenges. This perhaps, is why Strada (1999) notes that each culture could "make sense when viewed from inside its private logic." He claims that "it is only when outsiders make value judgments about cultures do those cultures seem strange." (p. 158). What this means is that each culture could be valid in its perspective while for the outsiders, such may be invalid, and to that extent, wrong. However, Velasquez (2005) would want us to note that there is a difference between cultural relativism and ethical relativism. According to him, while cultural relativism hinges on the sociological fact that different societies believe in different moralities, ethical relativism holds that the same action that is right in one society may be wrong in another. On a critical look, the difference is so slight that many often use the two terms synonymously without noticing any difference. Yet the fact remains that cultural relativism (though sociological) suggests ethical relativism (which is philosophical), and vice versa.

Cultural relativism is one of the offshoots of post-modernist thinking. This is true when we consider the claim that it came to replace the "absolute moral standard of the 19th century and the accompanying value judgment" (Mitchell, 2011). In an era of 'do your own, and I do my own,' which postmodernism depicts, there is bound to be a serious ethical quagmire which could point to a universal difficulty in dealing with ethical problems such as child abuse. This is because there is no definite standard where everyone could hold on as a paradigm: being that realities are socially constructed. This then takes us to the concept of social construction.

2.3 Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is the theory or belief that social meaning, normative meaning, or whatever meaning is socially fixed or (and) defined; that is meaning of any social reality is dependent on what the society builds as models of explaining and understanding such realities (Wallace & Wolf, 2012). This means that the meaning of social realities is not dependent on some sort of objective or universal standard or truth out there waiting to be found. Constructionism suggests that there is not only one true reality, but that reality may be multiple. Social construction, therefore, is about the way in which our sense of reality, especially our sense of social reality, is formed during the interaction, experience, and history through language (Hacking, 2003). Hacking notes that there are two types of social constructionism, namely, strong constructionism and weak constructionism. The first is the radical type that says that certain social realities need not exist the way they are for they are harmful and, therefore, should be done away with. The weak version says that some realities need not have been the way they are, though in their present form seems inevitable, but they are not.

At this point, it is important not to confuse constructionism with constructivism. Many social scientists often use the two terms interchangeably. But it seems there are some latent differences. Constructionism is used more in sociology, where reality is viewed as being put in place through social interactions and understanding of members of the society; whereas constructivism is said to be used more in the realm of psychology where reality is viewed as constructed by the individual; and understanding here depends on the individual's cognitive processes and viewpoints (www.philosophybasics.com). This leans more towards constructionism. However, it is important to note that both

concepts are tightly linked and that they suggest a departure from the positivist attitude that the world is objectively knowable. Both claim that social reality and meaning of such is fixed or put forward (constructed) by the participants (individuals in the society) through a process rather than objectively existing on its own.

3 THE REALITY OF 'CHILD ABUSE' VIS A VIS DISPARITY IN THE CONCEPTION OF 'ABUSE'

This section attempts to examine the reality of the phenomenon of child abuse and the disparate ideas in what constitutes the 'abuse,' which inadvertently presents it as a socially fixed (constructed) idea. Here the major types of child abuse will be presented regarding how some cultures may differ in whether such could be accepted as child abuse or not.

3.1 Physical Abuse

This is said to consist of deliberate actions such as punching, beating, kicking, biting, throwing, shaking, hitting, burning, etc., that may lead to bruises, fractures or death of a child by a parent, caregiver, or other persons. (www.childwelfare.gov). Given this description, it is pertinent or common for people to accept that there are many instances of physical abuse, as seen in real-life experiences. But the quandary lies in the weight of beating, hitting, kicking, etc., and what all such physical punishment could lead to; that is, either injury or death. In some cultures, physical abuse is said to occur only when a child suffers a specified type of injury. In other cultures, any serious injury that is not accidental in nature is considered abuse. In this regard,, the Britannica Concise Encyclopedia (2006) notes that when an abuse results in the death of a child, some evidence of the abuse or 'child battered syndrome' would be required to ascertain that the death was not accidental. The above shows how intriguing and slippery the issue of abuse could be, even if it could possibly lead to death.

To further show how disparate the idea of abuse is, we can appeal to Strada (1999), who presents a case of a young American boy who was to be given "six strokes on the bare buttocks with a split bamboo cane" for vandalism according to Singaporean law and custom. Strada notes that for the Americans this type of punishment is barbaric and therefore amounts to abuse. Here we can see that what one culture sees as an acceptable and legal way of punishment to a recalcitrant child is condemned by another culture as barbaric and unacceptable. In the same vein, McIntyre and Silva (1992), on their study of child abuse and culture point out that it is common for the black low-income earners to punish severely their young ones than the rich, well placed, and developed whites would do. But the point to note that each would, however, see the other's action as child abuse.

3.2 Neglect and Abandonment

This refers to the failure of a parent or guardian or any caregiver to give adequate protection or due care and attention to the child and, of course, failure to provide the child's basic needs. Neglect may be physical, (failure to provide necessary food, shelter or appropriate attention); educational (failure to attend to the child's education needs); emotional (inattention to a child's emotional needs or failure to provide psychological care); medical (failure to provide necessary medical or health attention). Abandonment is defined by most scholars as a form of neglect. Abandonment occurs when a child has been left alone; forsaken or thrown away (in extreme cases). It also consists of withdrawing support to help despite the natural allegiance, congeniality or responsibility to care for the child. There are many 'real' cases of neglect everywhere in the world, though cultures differ as to what constitutes abuse in such cases. For example, a Danish couple living in New York City were sentenced to a jail term for neglect; specifically, 'child endangerment' – a form of child abuse. The offence was that they left their baby in a stroller in the fresh air and sunshine outside of a restaurant, while they were eating inside. For them, it was a common and accepted tradition in Denmark, yet they forgot that there were in the US. The New York law caught up with them when the city police picked up the infant, and they were thrown into jail where they spent two frantic days (Strada, 1999). The above illustrations show that cultural values, standards of care in the society, and even poverty level may contribute to 'maltreatment', which may point toward child abuse in the eyes of some other cultures. This further seems to show that the phenomenon of child abuse is real, but the 'idea' or conception seems to be somewhat constructed socially.

3.3 Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse, according to Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016) is defined as:

The employment, use, persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person in engaging in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct to produce a visual depiction of such conduct; or rape, and in cases of the caretaker or inter-familial relationships, statutory rape, molestation, prostitution, or another form of sexual exploitation of children, or incest with children (<https://www.childwelfare.gov>).

3.4 Emotional Abuse

This is also called psychological abuse. This has to do with a pattern of behavior that vitiates or mar a child's emotional development or sense of self-worth. Such actions like constant criticisms, obscene curses, threats, rejection, withholding of care and love, or support and guidance fall under emotional abuse. Usually, the aftermath effects of this could lead to psychological devastation. The quandary however is that while some cultures and families see this as a way of disciplining the child, others see it as serious abuse. The foregoing definition seems quite comprehensive. It shows that such activities as incest, rape, sodomy, indecent exposure, exploitation through prostitution, fondling of a child's genitals, and child pornography, etc., by a parent or any person that has a responsibility to care for the child, constitute abuse.

To say that the abusive activities mentioned above abound in every part of the world is simply a platitude. However, cultural values and traditions warrant differences in conception regarding whether some of the activities mentioned above

should be regarded as abuses. For example, societies, where child-marriage is accepted, would not see sex between an adult (husband) with tell a fourteen-year-old girl that has been given out in marriage as sexual abuse. In contrast, some other societies would see this as severe abuse. Apart from this, traditions like clitoridectomy on the girl-child, forced marriage of young girls (of school age) are encouraged by some cultures, particularly in Africa and Asia. In contrast, westerners regard such traditions as abuse. The Africans, where such traditions are still practiced, see it as a way of checking sexual promiscuity and, therefore, as a means of encouraging sexual chastity. Though there seems to be a public outcry and condemnation against such practices, there are cases of very important personalities marrying teenage girls (of school age), because they believe their culture and religion endorse it. There are many such cases in Nigeria, and this puts to question the effectiveness or functionality of the right child Act signed into law since 2003 in Nigeria. Ojo (2016), in this regard, raises the question of whether such Act is enforced in Nigeria as there are rampant cases of child abuse in the tone of child trafficking, sexual abuse, child marriage, forced labor, etc.

3.5 Child Labor

Child Labor constitutes one major abuse that has been in practice all over the world. It refers to the forced employment of underage children or children of school age in terrible and hazardous conditions in which they earn wages just to cater for themselves or their families. Children are employed to work in the agricultural sector, manufacturing industries, as domestic aids, as bus conductors, etc. In all these cases, they are made to work long hours and, in turn, are paid low wages. D'Avolio (2004), tracing the origin of child labor, notes that "the belief in child labor was a natural extension of the Puritan religious tenets that preached the virtue of industry and the vice of idleness" (p. 115). He notes that before the 19th and early 20th centuries in America, for instance, the practice was an accepted part of the culture, and various methods were devised to perpetuate it. Work, according to him, was thought to be in the best interest of the child as it would help cultivate wholesome values and good moral development.

Child labor seems to be a universal phenomenon. But it is most pronounced in developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as there are no serious laws to restrain children from work. D'Avolio (2004) quoting the International Labor Organization notes that of the estimated 246 million child laborers aged between five and seventeen all over the world, the most considerable percentage comes from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It should be noted that child labor can take other forms apart from the ones mentioned above. Tichler (2004) notes that child labor can take the form of prostitution, which, according to him, is widespread mainly in Asia. He notes that thousands of girls are kidnapped and sold to brothels in Thailand, India, Pakistan, and even in Africa and Latin American countries.

Though there have been calls, especially from the western world, to stop child labor (since it is an abuse of the child), many developing nations, because of their poverty level, see it as a necessity. Such cultures defend child labor as necessary for economic viability and survival. For low-income families, especially in developing cultures, child labor is not seen as abuse but rather a positive value that prepares the child for adulthood. For such families, what is regarded as abuse by the developed world and rich families is indispensable for the poor if they must meet their basic needs like food, shelter, and clothing. This shows that what constitutes abuse is fixed or constructed by the cultures in question.

3.6 Nature Eye-view and the Objective Reality of Child Abuse

So far, an attempt has been made to show that child abuse is not something or a phenomenon that is imagined: there are very many cases of children who have been physically, sexually, and emotionally abused. Also, there are degrees and kinds of child abuse, some of which have been explained above. But the philosophical quandary is, whether child abuse is socially constructed or whether it is real as this paper assumes.

Hacking (2003) attempts to clarify the confusion as to whether child abuse is real or whether it is socially constructed. For him, child abuse as an idea is a social construct because it evolved from one level to another. He notes, "when the concept was activated first, it meant battered children, but by 1980 it meant sexual abuse." Any idea, according to him, that is "debated, assessed, applied, and developed in a social setting" is constructed. In other words, since these ideas originated within definite societies, and in definite time and was agreed (or disagreed) upon, then they are socially constructed. On the other hand, the behavior that is called child abuse, which has been a fact of human history, according to Hacking is what constitutes the reality of the phenomenon. This means that despite what has now been 'constructed' as 'child abuse', there has always been a phenomenon regarded as 'child abuse' as far as harsh and injurious behavior towards children is considered.

But we must note that it will not be prudent to say that child abuse is both 'real' and 'socially constructed' at the same time. This would somewhat violate the law of contradiction. In this regard, Hacking (2003) would rather want us to say that the "behavior we call child abuse nowadays has been a fact of most human communities at most times in history; and that the idea of child abuse and the consequences of that idea was constructed in the course of the years." Obviously, this suggests that Ian Hacking, like most social scientists, is a constructionist and therefore holds the belief that such issue as child abuse is fixed by society.

The consequence of this constructionism is that the meaning of child abuse depends on each society. Thus, what society x sees and holds as child abuse may not be regarded as such by society. Therefore, it is generally noted that social constructionism is a form of (or leads to) cultural relativism. Thus, it is expedient we note that the concept of child abuse as a social construct is a culturally relativistic disposition. But this culturally relativistic disposition of child abuse, as a social construct, leaves much to be desired all the flaws that always accompany cultural relativism in general. For example, if it is held, according to cultural relativism that there can be no objective truth in morality and that right and wrong are dependent on societies or cultures (James & Rachels, 2012), then it would mean that such evil as infanticide, slavery, clitoridectomy, child labor, sexual exploitation of children, should not be condemned because specific

communities do accept them as standard in their own perspective. We must accept that these forms of child abuse wherever they occur and whatever conditions (harsh environment, poverty, traditions, etc.) that warrant them are wrong and condemnable.

The implication of what has been pointed out above is that cultural relativism seems to fail in the task of giving any serious or cogent account of aspects that could be clearly accepted as the human actual moral life and law. Therefore, it is problematic to translate relativistic cultural dispositions from the abstract to concrete applications as there is bound to be unnecessary and devastating divergent views. But even if our knowledge of the good and evil of child abuse, for instance, depends on what has been molded (to use Hackings word) or constructed in our societies, does it mean we cannot take what could be called 'nature's eye-view' or objective view of things? By 'nature eye-view,' is meant the instinct of feeling that we are part of nature, and more importantly, moral and social beings. It is that instinct that grips our understanding that nature has endowed man with the ability of family life and sociality, the instinct of attachment to their young ones and preservation of self and the young ones; the desire towards happiness, and the good; and the natural urge to avoid pains.

It is in this regard that I posit that man, by nature, is a moral being (because it is the only man that has the sense of the good and evil), can always naturally understand the abuse of a child wherever it occurs. After all, there is no man/woman of sane mind, brought up in an orderly community who would not know that infanticide, for example, or such other evil is abuse and that he/she ought not to do it or even encourage it. According to Ritter (1957), a man by nature and as a natural being is influenced by such instincts as self-preservation, parental instinct (of boundness), the instinct of family life, and social fellowship, the desire for the good, the beautiful and happiness, etc. If this is the case, then it is not out of place to argue that there exists the natural boundness between humans and that the abuse of its young ones in any way is an aberration. Thus, the idea that societies differ in their conception of what constitutes child abuse does not mean that child abuse cannot be objectively recognized as evil or wrong by all.

4 CONCLUSION

The idea of child abuse as far as it is seen as molded, formed, debated, agreed (or disagreed) upon by distinct societies at definite times and history could obviously be regarded as constructed and, to that extent, inherently relativistic. But this is how far such argument can go: for no man sane enough would say that killing innocent children (infanticide) for example, no matter the custom or situation of the culture where such evil is perpetrated, would claim that such is not evil and therefore does not constitute any abuse.

The relativistic tendency underlying the social construction of the notion of child abuse, therefore, leaves much to be desired, for it suggests that there is no mistreatment of the child that can be generally seen by all men as 'child abuse' and to that extent condemned as wrong. Moreover, if it is the case that social construction of child abuse is basically a process whereby people continuously create through actions and interaction shared reality of what is to be accepted by them, in so far as it is meaningful to them as Wallace and Wolf (2012) hold, then it would follow or imply that there is nothing to be regarded as abuse in reality. But there are enormous raw facts of child abuse everywhere, and that calls for more research in that area. I believe conclusions of such research would support my argument against the relativistic conception of child abuse.

It is the position of this paper that child abuse should not be merely seen as a social construct; it is real: That there are disparities in what constitutes abuse cannot wish away the fact that this evil has been a fact of human history. The point is that if we can honestly develop and apply the 'nature eye-view' then every human being would understand the abuse of the child anywhere and any time. With this understanding, every person with a sane mind would know that he/she has a natural responsibility to protect the child in all ramifications. As such, when mistreatment of a child occurs in anyway, it would be wrong to say that the idea of such mistreatment is 'socially constructed.' We intuitively should know the reality of such evil while we may as well accept that as humans, we cannot always be perfect.

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