Parents' beliefs on the causes of child maltreatment

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Abstract

The present study presents an analysis of the beliefs of a sample of Portuguese parents on the causes of child maltreatment as well as an analysis of the variability factors of such beliefs. A sample of 358 Portuguese parents answered to a questionnaire concerning beliefs on causes of child maltreatment. The questionnaire was based on a review of literature on etiological models of maltreatment. The results show that parents' beliefs on the causes of child maltreatment have a multifactorial structure which integrates the ontogenic, interactionist, social and cultural factors, proposed by most theoretical models on the etiology of child maltreatment. Analyses performed on the beliefs' factors showed that the variability of these beliefs was mainly due to socioeconomic status and parental experience of the respondents.
Key words: parents' beliefs; child maltreatment causes; variability factors.

In spite of notable progresses, Portugal still faces major structural challenges in child care system. One fifth of the population lives below the poverty line (Santos & Mercurio, 2004), and the country has the lowest rate in the EU of young adults (25-39 years) who have only completed secondary education (Ministério da Educação, 2005). The large proportion of persistent poverty is a problem, and the country was ranked bottom within the EU with regard to the probability of individuals escaping from this social problem (Eurostat, 2003). Relative child poverty rates in Portugal are among the highest in the EU, and the incidence of poverty among this group was about 35% higher than for the whole population (Bastos & Nunes, 2009). This means that children constitute a group particularly exposed to risk. In an index of child wellbeing in Europe published by Bradshaw and Richardson (2009) Portugal has ranked on 21st out of 29 European countries. In each of the domains evaluated in this study the results on key indicators suggest major problems on: 1) health (including indicators on infant mortality and birth weight), 21st on the ranking; 2) subjective wellbeing (including indicators on how children feel about their lives and health), 23rd on the ranking ; 3) material resources (including indicators on child poverty), 21st on the ranking; 4) education (including indicators on achievement and youth inactivity), 22nd on the ranking; and 5) children's relationships (including indicators on how easy children say they find it to talk to their parents and get on with their classmates), 13th on the ranking.

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Although in the beginning of the previous decade the Portuguese level of child protection and care was considered by the UNICEF (2003) as one of the worst in the industrialized world, systematic research initiatives concerning the prevalence of child abuse in Portugal is still scarce. The first standardized, retrospective, self-report assessment of childhood and adolescent maltreatment in a large sample of adults in Portugal conducted by Figueiredo, Bifulco, Paiva, Maia, Fernandes, and Matos, (2004) indicated a high level of prevalence of any kind of abuse. Later, Machado, Gonçalves, Matos, and Dias (2007) observed the self-reported prevalence of child physical and emotional abuse from a representative sample of parents in two-parent families, noting that the prevalence of child physical abuse reported in this population (12.3%) was considerably higher than that found in studies in other European countries, such as England (9% according to Hazel, Ghate, Creighton, Field, & Finch, 2003) and Italy (9% according to Bardi & Borgognini-Tarli, 2001).

In spite of the lack of research in the field, increasing awareness of these persistent challenges promoted new legislation and subsequent implementation of new social responses in Portugal. Current child protection policies and practices acknowledge nowadays, the importance of the community and the social context in the identification and response to child maltreatment.

The rational underlying these community-based initiatives is that populations will be better understood and thus better served if child protection systems are in closer proximity to the populations than it has traditionally been the case (Korbin, Coulton, Lindstrom-Ufuti, & Spilsbury, 2000). Community-based child protection has also been conceived as an avenue towards enhanced cultural competence. Nevertheless, common sense views and beliefs about child maltreatment constitute a line of research still scarcely explored, although the authors pursuing it (Dubowitz, Klockner, Starr, & Black, 1998; Giovannoni, 1989; Haj-Yahia & Shor, 1995; Korbin *et al*., 2000; Portwood, 1998, 1999; Simarra, Paul, & San Juan, 2002) deem it crucially relevant to the understanding of child maltreatment as a social problem.

Results provided by this line of research increase the awareness about the importance of assessing the views held by different populations. Indeed, the nature of the policies and practices, as well as the success of social responses to this phenomenon, is inevitably linked to the different conceptualizations of child maltreatment.

While substantial research attention has been directed towards how definitions of child maltreatment may vary across populations and professional groups (Dubowitz *et al*., 1998; Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Ima & Hohm, 1991; Korbin, 1981, 1997; Portwood, 1999; Sternberg & Lamb, 1991), scant attention has been directed towards how different populations, specifically parents, view the etiology of child maltreatment.

In fact, most of abovementioned studies have been primarily focused on questions of definition, severity, and reporting of maltreatment, providing valuable contributions to the continuous formulation of a body of knowledge useful to enhance cultural competence regarding these topics. However, research on the common sense views regarding what causes these situations is still notably scarce. The few studies that allude it (e.g., Dhopper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1991; Haj-Yahia & Shor, 1995; Korbin *et al*., 2000; Simarra *et al*., 2002) do not directly address parents beliefs and do not fully encompass an evaluative

perspective that considers an approach to parental believes literature (Sigel, 1985). Additionally, the comparative analysis of these studies suggests a wide variability in the degree of importance given to different causal factors, which vary as a function of the samples used in different countries and their different social and cultural contexts (e.g., United States, Colombia and West Bank and Gaza Strip).

Therefore, a major question in considering community-based child protection should focus on how parents view the causes of child maltreatment, and the extent to which these beliefs correlate with the main socio-demographic factors of the respondents, living environment, parental status, and parental experience. This kind of analysis will provide information potentially useful to the development of maltreatment prevention initiatives, focusing on raising parents' awareness on the risk factors for this phenomenon and to develop and implement programmes targeted for specific social groups.

To address these issues, the main goals of the present study are: (a) to develop a questionnaire addressing the Beliefs on Causes of Child Maltreatment encompassing a wider range of ecological factors (b) to examine what a sample of Portuguese parents consider to be the factors that contribute to the occurrence of maltreatment, as well as (c) to analyse the individual and social determinants of the variability of such beliefs.

Due to the integration of ecological and transactional perspectives in the study of child maltreatment (e.g., Belsky, 1980; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981), research on this subject is no longer framed by a unifactorial approach. Indeed, for the last two to three decades most studies have integrated the different levels of analysis, individual, family, socio-cultural context, until recently separately considered.

The above mentioned models, created during the 1980s, examined not only individual factors (e.g., parenting skills), but also parent-child interactions, the specific socio-ecological and family contexts of maltreating parents and their affiliation to different groups and cultures. During the 1990s, a line of empirical research arose which promoted the articulation of the existing models. This new approach influenced a theoretical production characterized by the presence of multiple variables (derived from the four main interaction systems: parents, child, environment and culture) and an articulation of the different processes accounting for the occurrence of maltreatment. The ensuing models show a considerable degree of convergence and share a growing number of common factors. This new line of research is well illustrated by Cicchetti and Lynch's ecological-transactional model (1993) regarding the determinant factors of parental abuse. Also, recent research on child maltreatment (e.g, Kotch *et al.*, 1997; Sidebotham & Heron, 2006; Sprang, Clark, & Bass, 2005) looks for the etiological factors of parental maltreatment in the individuals, in the interaction contexts and in the socio-cultural circumstances involved in the maltreatment.

Regarding the characteristics of the individuals -ontogenic factors- the literature refers to the parental history, either concerning the parents' own experience during childhood, (e.g., Pears & Capaldi, 2001; Sidebotham & Heron, 2006; Wolfe, 1991), or as a result of experiences associated to early phases of interaction with their children, lack of parental skills, and lack of ability to respond to children's needs (Belsky & Vondra, 1989; Rutter, 1989; Sidebotham & Heron, 2003). As to family and interaction contexts, this level includes factors such as family structure and dynamics (e.g., marital relation;

family organization) (Kotch *et al*., 1995; McGuigan & Pratt, 2001), family stress factors such as substance abuse and illness (e.g. Kotch *et al*., 1997; Sidebotham & Heron, 2006), characteristics of the child (Sullivan & Knutson, 2000) and the way parent-children interactions are developed (Belsky, 1993; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). Causes located at the social context level emphasize problems resulting from environmental and social factors and/or life circumstances that can cause stress, such as poverty, unemployment and work adversities, or mediator stress factors such as social and institutional support networks (Belsky & Vondra, 1989; Garbarino, Guttmann, & Seeley, 1986; Kotch *et al*., 1997; Rutter, 1989; Sidebotham & Heron, 2006; Sidebotham, Heron, Golding, & ALSPAC Study Team, 2002; Wolfe, 1991). Finally, cultural factors such as social agreement on body punishment as a legitimate practice of discipline, social attitudes towards violence in general, expectations about child discipline at home and at school, and the level of violence in the country and in the community, can result in environments where physical punishment and abuse can be expected even when openly or implicitly condemned (Belsky, 1980, 1993; Coohey, 2001; Korbin, 1994, 2002).

While there has been an effort to obtain lay definitions of child maltreatment, lay and parent's conceptualizations about the etiology of child maltreatment have been virtually ignored and little is known about how the populations views the causation of child maltreatment.

The etiology of child maltreatment is remarkably multifaceted, so are the conceptualizations about such complex phenomena. According to the results of studies on the common sense views about the causes of child maltreatment, the prevailing image pictures maltreatment as predominantly rooted in individual variables, such as maltreatment in childhood, personality traits of the maltreating parents (immaturity, aggressive behavior) (Dhooper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1991; Simarra *et al*., 2002), parents' addiction to alcohol and drugs (Haj-Yahia & Shor, 2005; Korbin *et al*., 2000; Simarra *et al*., 2002); familial variables such as family structure (Korbin et al., 2000), parents' marital or family problems (Dhooper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1991; Haj-Yahia & Shor, 2005); interactions between the parents and the child (Simarra *et al*., 2002); or influences of the social environment such as poverty (Korbin *et al*., 2000; Simarra *et al*., 2002).

An examination of the perceptions of the risk factors of child maltreatment in different countries indicates an overall agreement upon factors such as parent's addiction to drugs and alcohol. However, the highest percentage of overall agreement with respect to factors related to individual and familial categories of the ecological model were found in the study of Simarra and colleagues (2002) and Haj-Yahia and Shor (2005) in Colombia and West Bank, respectively. Participants tended to a lesser degree to consider factors that were related to the social and cultural context as risk factors.

Interestingly, in the study of Korbin and colleagues (2000) in United States, poverty and family structure explained the largest proportion of the variance while individual pathology, including a childhood history of abuse, explained the least. The parents' individual characteristics as causes of child maltreatment, are then a less powerful explanatory principle for the lay population than the literature on child maltreatment (as well as the public awareness campaigns stressing the intergenerational cycle of violence and the professionals' underestimation of social causes as risk factors) suggested

(Calheiros, 2006; Korbin *et al*., 2000). On the other hand, Arabic and Colombian's tendency to view familial aspects as risk factors could be explained by the lack of tolerance in these societies to conflicts in the family. As noted by Haj-Yahia and Shor (2005) their tendency to minimize the cultural and social components may result in a narrow explanation for the phenomenon of child abuse and neglect.

As it is easily observed, believes about child maltreatment are subject to variability. In order to understand the source of such variability, researchers have looked for answers both in the subjects' proximal experiences and in more distal factors. In doing so, the relationship between the causal factors and gender, age, race-ethnicity, marital status, and high school graduation were analyzed by Korbin and colleagues (2000) and Simarra and colleagues (2002). Both studies observed that participants who had completed high school were more likely to attribute the causes of maltreatment to individual pathology than in those who had not. Also the child characteristics and parent-child relationships were mentioned as causes of maltreatment by respondents with higher levels of education (Simarra *et al*., 2002).

Residents with higher family incomes, who were married, and who had graduated high school were more likely to provide explanations of child maltreatment that were focused on moral values instead of poverty, or substance abuse and stress. African-Americans were more likely to view child maltreatment as caused by individual pathology than were European-Americans. Males tended, more than females, towards viewing child maltreatment as rooted in impoverishment and family disorganization (Korbin *et al*., 2000). Women were found to highlight the violent and aggressive psychological characteristics as causes of maltreatment and younger participants and participants with children frequently mentioned the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment (Simarra *et al*., 2002).

As it is noted, these studies gathered information of social nature, and social information is expressed as a patchy, in plural and contradictory terms in that it derives both from personal experience and from ideas individuals come in contact with in their social groups and ecological environment, as well as from the assimilated scientific and technical information.

Despite a recognized need for assisting professionals in the performance of community evaluation and intervention on child maltreatment, little empirical evidence has been targeted at developing and enhancing current evaluating efforts, particularly those efforts directed to access and understand what the populations being served by child welfare systems believe to be the problem and why it occurs.

Method

Participants

Participants were 358 parents, 122 fathers (34.1%) and 236 mothers (65.9%) of children in public primary education schools. Mothers and fathers mean ages were 36.4 years (*SD*= 5.68) and 39.3 (*SD*= 8.34), respectively.

Measures

Demographic variables. Demographic variables assessed included the participants' age, ethnic background, parental status (mother/father), living environment (urban/rural) and number of children (has one child/two children/three or more children). The indicator of socioeconomic status (high, middle, low) was derived from the following variables: mother's education level, mother's occupation, father's education level, father's occupation, family's subjective SES (Cronbach Alpha .80). Parental experience (1= one child; 2= two children; 3= three or more children) was also recorded (Table 1).

Beliefs on Causes of Child Maltreatment Questionnaire (BCCMQ). The BCCMQ was designed for this study and was developed both from the current literature on the theories about the etiology of child maltreatment (e.g., Belsky, 1980; Bronfenbrebnner, 1979; Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981; National Research Council, 1993) and from the literature about common sense beliefs on causes of child maltreatment etiology (Dhopper, Royse, & Wolfe, 1991; Korbin *et al*., 2000; Simarra *et al*., 2002). In order to select the belief-contents of the questionnaire and following the rationale that the analysis of beliefs concerning child abuse presupposes an assessment framed in the specificities of each social and cultural context, we developed a qualitative study with professionals working in child protection services (Calheiros, 2006). The BCCMQ comprises a total of 28 items formulated as beliefs: (a) seven items on development characteristics and personal background (ontogenic factors) (e.g., "Parents' behaviour relates to their own childhood and is very hard to change") -the role played by personality traits and psychological characteristics; level of functionality and ability as a parent; previous experiences and learning from their own maltreating parents' background as a child, and from previous contacts with children and child rearing (e.g., Belsky & Vondra, 1989; Rutter, 1989; Wolfe, 1991); (b) seven items on the family context and interaction that characterises the child-family immediate environment (micro-system) (e.g., "Often it is the children's personality and/or behaviour that leads the parents to maltreat them") -specific family factors such as the structure and dynamics of family relations (marital relationship, family organization); family stress factors; characteristics of the child; interactions between parents and child; (c) seven items on the social contexts of maltreatment (exo-system) (e.g., "Problems parents have at work strongly influence how they raise their children") -life stress caused by social and environment factors; life circumstances likely to induce stress such as unemployment or work-related problems; stress mediator factors such as social and institutional support networks (Belsky & Vondra, 1989; Garbarino *et al*., 1986; Rutter, 1989; Wolfe, 1991); (d) seven items on culture and social insertion (macro-system) (e.g., "Often parents maltreat their children because they think they have every right over their children") -how significant is the acceptance of physical punishment as a legitimate form of discipline in the maltreating parents' society; social attitudes towards violence in general; commonly held beliefs about discipline techniques; general level of violence in the maltreating parents' country and community (Belsky, 1980). The 28 items of the Beliefs on Causes of Child Maltreatment Questionnaire (BCCMQ) were rated on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale as to how much the participants believed that each item contributed to the occurrence of child maltreatment. The face validity of the instrument was established by pretesting it with 20 parents.

Procedure

The BCCMQ was distributed in school to parents of children attending public primary education schools in Lisbon, along with a form regarding participants' demographic data. A cover letter was attached to each questionnaire explaining the purpose of the study and providing instructions for completing the questionnaire. BCCMQ's instructions informed participants that the questionnaire intended to know their opinions on what leads some parents to maltreat their children. The questionnaire also contained the definition of maltreatment according to the Portuguese law (Diário da República, Lei n.o 147/99 de 1 de Setembro, art.º 3º, of the Law for Protection of Children and Youth in Danger).

The time needed to complete the questionnaire was approximately 15 minutes. The questionnaires were returned anonymously together with the respective written consent. Over 85% of the parents responded to the questionnaire.

Results

As Table 1 shows, most participants were middle Social Economic Status (SES) Portuguese, living in urban area. Approximately 50% of the participants have 2 children.

The 28 items were subjected to a principal components factor analysis with orthogonal rotation. The Bartlett test allowed us to reject that the matrix underlying the items under analysis was an identity matrix (χ^2= 821.37; *p*= .000). KMO statistics showed a rather high value (KMO= .71), indicating the sampling adequacy for this factorial solution. The orthogonal rotation yielded four factors (eigenvalues >1.00) accounting for 53.8% of the total explained variance. The reliability analysis, computed for each factor using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient showed that the four factors had acceptable levels of internal consistency (Table 2).

The first factor, labelled "ontogenic", reflects a representation of child maltreatment as mainly caused by individual aspects that the abuser brings into the (maltreatment)

Table 1. Characteristics of participants.

		n (%)
Parental status *N* (353)	Fathers	122 (34.1)
	Mothers	236 (65.9)
Living Environment *N* (353)	Rural	83 (23,5)
	Urban	270 (76.5)
Socioeconomic status *N* (304)	Low	45 (14.8)
	Medium	193 (63.5)
	High	66 (21.7)
Ethnic background *N* (358)	Portuguese	335 (93.6)
	African	23 (6.4)
Parental experience *N* (352)	1 child	99 (28.1)
	2 children	178 (50.6)
	3 or more children	75 (21.3)

Table 2. Factorial structure of beliefs on causes of child maltreatment.

Parental beliefs	Factor I	Factor II	Factor III	Factor IV
(7) Parents' behaviour relates to their own childhood and is very hard to change.	.74			
(2) A maltreated child will most likely become a maltreating parent.	.68			
(28) Parents maltreat their children because they have been through a lot in their lives.	.58	.25	.24	
(8) Parents maltreat their children because they do not like themselves.	.56			-.25
(13) The parents we had can strongly influence the way we treat our children.	.44		.39	.20
(25) Often it is the children's personality and/or behaviour that leads the parents to maltreat them.		.76		
(11) Maltreating parents are not bad people; children are the ones who, occasionally, ruin it all.		.71	-.26	
(24) Sometimes parents have such hard lives that maltreating their children becomes inevitable.		.63	.24	
(16) Often parents maltreat their children because they interpret wrongly what their children do.		.49		
(21) Often parents maltreat their children because they think they have every right over their children.			.83	
(20) Often parents maltreat their children because they do not know better how to raise them.		.25	.72	
(22) Problems parents have at work strongly influence how they raise their children.	.37		.55	
(27) Taking good care of one's children is simply a question of the parent's educational level.				.83
(3) If parents fit better in society, there would not be so much child maltreatment				.79
Variance (total= 53.8%)	23.8	11.9	9.6	8.4
Cronbach's Alpha	.63	.58	.65	.61

situation. Child maltreatment is characterised as being determined by psychological variables, in that the legacy one brings from one's own childhood and parental models seems to be characterized by multiple negative events and psychological variables including abuse in one's own childhood, and psychological or emotional problems. This factor explained the largest proportion of the variance, 23.8% and has a Cronbach's alpha of .63.

The second factor, labelled "interactionist", assembles interactionist explanatory ideas, taking into account the role and characteristics of the child, parental attributions on their children, and life stress present in parents-children interactions. This factor explains 11.9% of the total variance and has a Cronbach's alpha of .58.

The third factor reflects the "cultural" perspective, integrating ideas on the rights parents have over their children and on maltreatment as a child rearing strategy. This factor explains 9.6% of the total variance and has a Cronbach's alpha of .65.

The forth factor, labelled "context and social insertion" expresses a causal model which includes the maltreating parent's education level and their social integration status. This last factor, then, reflects respondents' views of societally-induced stresses on family organization. This factor explains 9.6% of the total variance and has a Cronbach's alpha of .65. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for these four factors.

The "ontogenic" factor shows a real mean virtually identical to the theoretical mean and a normal distribution. This means that ontogenic conceptions were accepted

Table 3. K-S Test Values, Significant Values, Asymmetry, Kurtosis and descriptive statistics.

	K-S	p values	Asymmetry Coef.	Kurtosis Coef	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	N
Factor I	1.232	.096	-.946	-.421	3.099	.673	1	5	348
Factor II	1.989	.001	2.984	.538	2.308	.669	1	4.50	350
Factor III	2.822	.000	-5.068	.007	3.326	.850	1	5	349
Factor IV	3.376	.000	-3.542	-.672	3.583	.888	1	5	355

and rejected by a similar number of participants, most of which did not have a clear opinion about them (neither agreeing nor disagreeing). The "interactionist" factor shows a positive asymmetric distribution, which is to say that most participants do not agree that the child plays a determining role in maltreatment interactions. The "cultural" factor shows a negative asymmetric distribution indicating that, in general, participants tend to agree with an explanation based on values, rights and child rearing goals. Beliefs as to the significance of "context and social insertion" have also evoked, and more emphatically so, a wide consensus: the distribution is likewise skewed to the right.

Analysis of variance (ANOVAs) followed by Tukey's HSD (Honestly Significant Differences) tests were conducted to determine whether there were differences in the four factors according to differences in the following variables: age, socioeconomic status, living environment, parental status and parental experience. The variable ethnicity was excluded from the analysis due to the dispersion of frequencies among participants by the two groups considered - Portuguese: $N= 335$ (93.6%); African: $N= 23$ (6.4%). Age and living environment did not show to be related to any of these four factors.

Table 4 shows the ANOVA results, revealing a single main effect of socioeconomic status in the ontogenic. Means analysis indicates that adherence to the different beliefs increases as a function of socioeconomic status. It suggests that participants with higher socioeconomic status ($M= 3.30$) are more prone to believe in the significance of the maltreating parents' ontogenic characteristics than by medium $M= 3.07$) or low socioeconomic status ($M= 2.98$), and in their values and goals, as an explanation for child maltreatment.

With regard to "ontogenic" beliefs, proximal factors show a main effect of the variables "parental status" indicating the beliefs expressed by these variables to have higher support among fathers ($M= 3.26$) than among mothers ($M= 2.96$).

Table 4. Effects of Socioeconomic Status, Living Environment, Parental Status and Experience in Adherence to Different Types of Beliefs (F values and levels of significance).

	Ontogenic	Interactionist	Cultural	Context/ social insertion
Socioeconomic status	3.26[**]	1.59	2.64	.58
Living Environment	.09	1.85	.26	.32
S. Status × L. Environment	.64	.79	.23	.49
Parental status	10.83[*]	10.83[*]	14.43[*]	.74
Parental experience	2.39	.006	3.62[**]	.67
P. Status × P. Experience	1.02	.86	3.33[**]	.48

*$p \leq 0.001$; **$p \leq 0.05$

As to the "interactionist" factor, ANOVA results show again a main effect of "parental status" that indicate a higher support of these believes by fathers (*M*= 2.49) than by mother (*M*= 2.21).

The ANOVA for the "cultural" factor reinforces the observed influence of parental status and shows the support that fathers (*M*= 3.52), more than mothers (*M*= 3.11) express regarding the variables underlying this factor. Other main effects was found for parental experience (*M* for parents with three children= 3.09 < *M* for parents with two children= 3.44; *M* for parents with one child= 3.41).

Finally, results yield an interaction effect between these "parental status" and "parental experience" which suggests that fathers with more parental experience -three children (fathers *M*= 3.47; mothers *M*= 2.86); (*t* (72)= 2.70; p<.01) held different (stringer) believes towards the variables included in the cultural factor than mothers. In parents with one or two children, the parental status does not seem relevant to this differentiation (*t* (97) <1; *t* (169) <1, respectively).

Context/social insertion was not related to any of these individual and social variables.

DISCUSSION

In an effort to extend the body of knowledge about the beliefs on the etiology of child abuse, to include factors located at several ecological levels, to inform policy and practice and to create conditions for the improvement of social awareness regarding this problem, the present study was conducted to analyze parents beliefs on the causes of child maltreatment; and to identify the factors of their variability.

As far as the structure of beliefs on causes of maltreatment is concerned, results suggest that the Portuguese resort to the integration, ontogenic, interactionist, cultural, and context/social integration factors, grouped according to the major explanatory theories for child maltreatment. We have identified four factors that explain more than half of the variance in Portuguese parents' explanations for the causes of child maltreatment.

Interestingly while poverty and family structure explained the largest proportion of the variance in the study of Korbin *et al*. (2000), the current study suggests that the "social context" which includes the maltreating parent's education level and their social integration status, explained the least. Individual factors, including a childhood history of abuse explained the largest portion of the variance. Theoretically, our results can be indicative of the dynamics characterising the relation between scientific theories on parental maltreatment and production of narratives and images of laypeople on this same subject. The intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment, then, seems to be a powerful explanatory principle for a lay population as it is in professional formulations about the etiology of child maltreatment and in the clinical research and literature.

Regarding the importance that Portuguese parents give to the different causal factors of child maltreatment, despite their higher adherence to the cultural and context/ social insertion beliefs (see factor means in Table 3), Portuguese participants also

integrate ontogenic explanations (psychological traits of the abusers and their childhood circumstances) in their beliefs. On the other hand, they reject causes related to the child itself and to the parents-child relationship.

Results seem to indicate that the prevailing image in Portuguese parents reflects a notion of maltreating parents as passive beings, to whom no responsibility for their acts of maltreatment can be ascribed. Similar results have been found in other studies where maltreatment is mostly explained as a consequence of the culture and society the abusers live in (e.g., Simarra *et al*., 2002) and of their own ontogenic history (Haj-Yahia & Shor, 2005; Simarra *et al*., 2002).

As to the factors responsible for the variability among beliefs, and also as to their articulation with the different factors underlying such beliefs, results seem to indicate that individual and social demographic variables have a weak relationship with the four causal factors and therefore must be interpreted cautiously.

An interesting finding seems to be that participants adhere to different types of beliefs according to socioeconomic status and position. Higher status participants hold that causes of maltreatment are more likely to depend on ontogenic, as Korbin *et al*. (2000) and Simarra *et al*. (2002), and cultural factors than lower status participants. This pattern of results seems to indicate that individuals of higher socioeconomic status, whose social position grants them better access to resources that facilitate their interaction with their children, when faced with a choice of possible causes of maltreatment, vehemently adhere to an image associated with uncontrollable and apologetic factors. These participants resorted more frequently than their counterparts to the abusers' history of ontogenic development and to cultural factors.

On the other hand, participants adhere to different types of beliefs according to parental status, thus indicating that the ontogenic and interactionist beliefs have higher support among fathers than among mothers. The reason for these beliefs seems to be that their own dominant experience as mothers precludes them from conceiving that other parents could maltreat their children on the grounds of their personal variables or motivated by the history of development of the victim-child.

Finally, in same way, given identical levels of experience with children, male participants were more prone than their female counterparts to accept explanations based on cultural and sociological as determining factors of maltreatment.

Several methodological concerns in the present study should be taken into consideration in interpreting the results. A first methodological concern is the potential problem of social desirability. Even thought the responses were anonymous and formulated as beliefs, there could have been some social desirability effect in the participants' answers. A second concern is that the questionnaire was constructed specifically for the present study however some psychometric properties of this questionnaire were established, namely face and construct validity. A third concern is that the subjects in this study were drawn only from the urban areas. Therefore, the generalizability of the results to Portuguese parents might be questioned.

Beliefs are indeed subject to evolution, and when they change in response to a change in social conditions or scientific progress, they frequently are the focus of public debate. And results such as this study's can be useful in such debates.

Firstly, because those results that directly address beliefs elicit the diverse perceptions on family and children needs, and on the community role in family intervention. From a social point of view, an analysis of common sense beliefs on the diversity of causes leading to child maltreatment may contribute to shedding some light on issues of prediction (stability and change of social behaviour -both in general and concerning parents) and justification (planning and strategies) of design and implementation of intervention programmes in the community. An interactive analysis of variability factors of parents' beliefs makes it possible to build awareness of child maltreatment and to develop and implement programmes targeted for specific social groups.

Secondly, because they underline the fact that results obtained in research on the etiology of maltreatment, once assimilated, more than providing immediate solutions where intervention is concerned, do contribute to change lay and professional perceptions about child maltreatment. As Haj-Yahia and Schor (2005) argued people' awareness about the problem of child maltreatment might increase with their exposure to knowledge about child maltreatment.

Results from research which tests theoretical models of maltreatment etiology could and should be made public in the professional and social domains, so that findings from research may help reorient parental's prevailing ideas on intervention and, in the process, contribute to better reflect the real needs of the parents and the interests of children. Others, apropos child rearing and maltreatment (e.g., Thompson, 1993), have already emphasised the "transmission of knowledge" as a process by which the lay community absorbs social sciences via mass media and contact with specialists, among other sources. Concepts, ideas and development theories are all part of the notions and values laypeople have, and they clearly interfere both in their assessment of problems, needs and services available, and in their considerations and judgments on the intervention alternatives and respective implementation.

Furthermore, exposing results of research may contribute to the evolution of public perceptions on what characterises families and children. Therefore, the dissemination of research results not only contributes to a gradual change in the beliefs according to which intervention proposals are developed and evaluated, but it also increases demand and scope of the risk factors. This, in turn, leads to a greater awareness of the prevention of maltreatment and social control that the community and social support institutions exert on those family factors.

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