

Parental Socio-Cultural Background as Predictors of Child Abuse in Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examined the connection between parental socio-cultural belief and child abuse. Using a correlational research design, a total of 500 participants were enlisted from Delta State, Nigeria for the study. The participants were asked to answer a self-constructed questionnaire. The data were analysed with independent samples t-test, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Pearson's correlation coefficient (PPMCC). The result showed that male and female parents did not differ in the abuse of their children ($p > 0.05$ level of significance; $d = .002$, for physical abuse; $.003$ for sexual abuse; and $.001$ for child neglect). Also, there was no statistically significant difference in child abuse based on parents' marital status ($p > 0.05$ level of significance; $d = .01$, for physical abuse; $.01$ for sexual abuse; and $.01$ for child neglect). Although a relationship existed between the cultural belief, religious belief and child abuse, the relationship was not moderated by gender and parents' marital status.

Keywords: Parents; Culture; Religion; Beliefs; Child Abuse; Child Neglect

I. Introduction

Children are a heritage from God. Marriage, in the African traditional society, does not record a complete success story if a couple is childless. Consequently, couples explore all possible means to have several children as much as possible. Some even go to the degree of demanding for children from spiritual centres (Gesinde, 2004). The large number of children produced by an average African demonstrates the level of importance attached to children.

If having children is as much important as stated above, one would, therefore, expect that children would be given the best of love, care, attention, support and so on. This becomes paramount because, at their age, they cannot be independent. Emphasising on the importance of children, Gesinde (2018) noted that even in the animal kingdom, neonates are precious than gold. According to him, most animals could go the extra mile to protect their new birth.

It is sad, however, that in the place of love and affection, these children get maltreated and often time neglected. The World Health Organisation, WHO (as cited in Eben, 2017) defined child abuse as several ill-

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treatment, both emotionally and physically that causes harm or injury to the child. In defining child abuse holistically, Gesinde (as cited in Gesinde, 2018) identified the following facts associated with child abuse practices:

the child is unjustifiably treated consequently upon his/her omitted or committed acts; the mistreatment (sic) of the child is intentionally or unintentionally carried out; the mistreatment (sic) denies the child of his/her rights to meaningful existence; the inappropriate treatment for omitted or committed offence of the child puts him/her in a state of physical or/and psychological disequilibrium; the improper treatment meted out for the child's acts is made possible because of the child's dependency and trust on the abuse (sic), and the total trust or dependency factor almost makes it difficult for the child to avert the possibility of being abused (p. 11).

Straus and Gelles (as cited in Okunola & Ojo, 2012) listed some forms of abuse by parents to include slapping; pushing grabbing or shoving; hitting with an object; throwing something at; kicking, biting or hitting; beating; threatening with knife or gun, and stabbing or shooting. Expanding this view, Okunola and Ojo (2012) identified the forms of child abuse to include physical abuse, physical neglect, verbal abuse, emotional/psychological abuse, street hawking, child labour, child abandonment and sexual abuse.

These abuses may expose the child to physical harm. Most times, children who have been abused are likely to experience maladjustment in society due to the nature of the abuse. The abuse not only affects the existence of the children but also creates difficulty for the growth of the children. In most cases, abused children die as a result of the maltreatment and those who survive often face an agonised emotional ordeal that may take longer for the bruises to be cured.

The prevailing cases of child abuse, according to research studies, indicate that every day, a significant number of children are exposed to serious abuse and neglect leading to physical and psychological injury and serious long-term consequences. The situation is not different in Delta State. Observation by the researcher has shown the incidence of child labour, child maltreatment, child marriage, child trafficking, neglect, and child prostitution in Delta State, Nigeria.

It is an indisputable fact that the prevalence of the child abuse phenomenon from the pre-historic period up to the present age has several sustaining factors. Until these reinforcing factors are kept at bay, an attempt at the eradication of the menace of child abuse might turn out to be a fruitless endeavour. Realizing this fact, quite a several scholars have pinpointed certain causative factors of child abuse. It is safe to conclude that from these submissions several factors cooperatively work together to sustain child abuse practices. Although different authors have pointed out certain sustaining factors of child abuse, the researcher is only interested in the role of parental cultural belief and religious belief.

The role of cultural belief in child abuse cannot be overemphasised. Every society is uniquely associated with several cultural beliefs or values. What is culturally accepted in one society may be a cultural taboo in another. In Nigeria, there are cultural beliefs on child training, marriage, religion, health and so on. Parental behaviour, in Nigeria, according to Nnachi's (2004) submission, is guided by culture and such parents always want their children to be obedient to the cultural beliefs. The Nigerian culture strongly supports child-

rearing practices that would instil discipline in the children. The laws even accord the responsibility of child discipline to the parents (Obinaju, 2004). D'Antonio, Darwish and McLean (1993) believed that child abuse is more likely in cultures where children are valued for their commercial usefulness, for preserving family lines and the cultural legacy, and for sources of emotional desire and gratification.

Nzewi & Ikediashi (as cited in Gesinde, 2018) posit that the goal of discipline is to mould and form the child in such a way that he/she will be able to adjust to traditional roles. Such discipline, George (2004) maintains, does not exclude violent approaches. Violent approaches would involve every dimension of physical abuse. The discipline of children is not limited only to parents as pointed out by Obinaju (2004). Parents even delegate uncles, aunts, elder brothers/sisters to discipline the child. Consequently, with or without the parents' presence the child would not evade appropriate or inappropriate disciplinary measures. The need to discipline the child is also backed up concerning the biblical injunction of spare the rod and spoil the child. Nigerians who tenaciously hold this religious belief would not allow their wards to be spoiled.

Another likely predictor of child abuse is a religious belief. The role of religious belief in the practice of child abuse calls for an investigation. This is because religious belief like cultural belief has a strong impact on the life of average Africans. According to Peter (1998), religion is a system of symbols which act to create prevailing, persistent and long-lasting dispositions and inspirations in men by expressing conceptions of a universal order of life and clothing these conceptions with such a feeling of factuality that the dispositions and inspirations seem exclusively realistic. Although, while child abuse is resisted in these religions, some religionists mischievously use their beliefs and practices to exercise child abuse. Greven (1991) pointed out that most religious dictates sometimes encourage violent, physically abusive child-rearing techniques. Justifying this, he quoted some biblical passages such as, "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes" and "Withhold no correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell" (Proverbs 13:24 and 23:13-14, respectively). Commands such as these and belief in an unforgiving God who would chastise earthly desire with the ultimate torment of hell, drive some parents to use physical chastisement to enforce parental control and to forbid supposed errant behaviour (Bottoms, Shaver, Goodman, & Qin, 1995; Ellison & Sherkat, 1993).

Parental marital status is also a likely factor that may prompt child abuse. This is referred to in this study to mean the parents' marital status under whom a child is. The parent in question could be married, single divorced, separated or widowed. In a nutshell, parental marital status is categorised under single or intact parenting. There are so many reasons which cause serious family instability. Take, for instance, economic situation, extramarital affairs, lack of trust and religion. These factors can cause separation or divorce of the couple. It is interesting to note that children at this point stand the penalties of the unsettled conflicts of their parents. Family circumstances, most particularly conflicts and marital violence, also have a contributory connection to child maltreatment. Sadly, not only do marital violence and family disorder scare and directly disturb children, but also the resulting outcome from these actions, ranging from changes in financial position and living quarters to loss of family harmony and safety protract the stress and thus the destructive impact on children's development (Mash & Wolfe, 2016).

Sex is a powerful predictor of individuals' behaviour. It is, therefore, not surprising to see males behaving in totally different ways from females. Male parents often respond to the child's action (and inaction) in different ways from female parents. Whether abusers are likely to be male or female, depends in part, on the

type of abuse. Studies conducted by Hunter (2000) suggest that women report using more physical discipline measures than men. Corroborating this view, Browne (2002) reports that mothers show more violence than fathers. However, according to Starling and Holden (2000), men are the most common offenders of dangerous head injuries, abusive fractures and other deadly injuries. Studies have reliably shown that in the instance of female victims of sexual exploitation, over 90% of the offenders are men, and in the case of male victims, between 63% and 86% of the offenders are men (Finkelhor, 1994).

As discussed above, empirical observations have shown that child abuse is prevalent in Delta Central Senatorial District. This is characterised by street hawking, child trafficking, physical abuse, emotional abuse as well as child marriage. This circumstance is not only worrisome, it has turned the society into a "time bomb", ready to explode. This is because today's children are tomorrow's leaders. If they are not appropriately taken care of and their needs met, they will grow into leaders without hearts. Several reasons have been advanced to be responsible for this social cancer. However, the researcher is interested in the role of parental cultural beliefs and socio-economic status. It is on this basis that this study examined the relationship between parental cultural beliefs, religious beliefs and child abuse.

II. Conceptual Framework

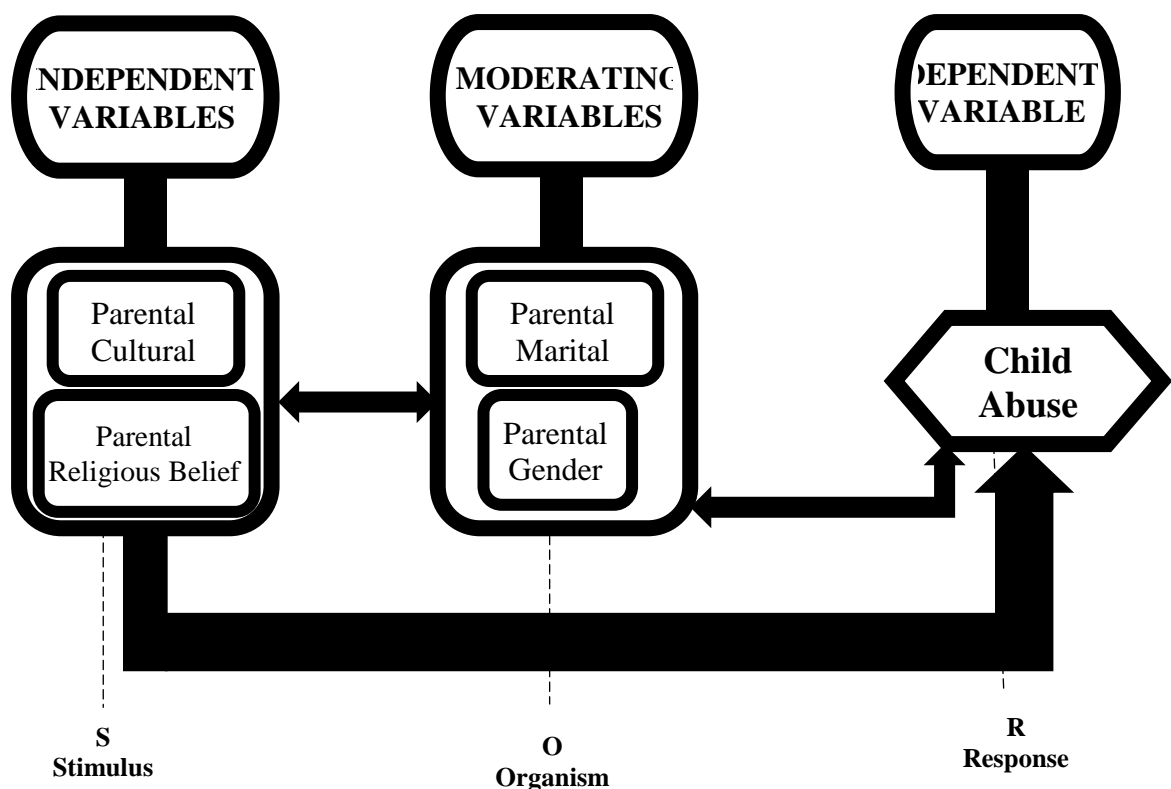


Figure 1: Proposed Model of the Study

Source: Adapted from Hull (1943) S-O-R equation model.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of the study. The model is based on Hull's principles of behaviour and he stressed on experimentation, (an Organized theory of learning), and the nature of behaviours, which he maintains are influenced by a connection between a stimulus and a response. Behaviours are goals that

are required to gratify primary motivations such as hunger, thirst, sex and the avoidance of pain. In other words, this satisfaction of needs help creates habits out of behaviours.

Hull upholds that human behaviour is a consequence of the continuous interface between the organism and its environment. The environment offers the stimuli that the organism requires to survive within the environment. He explains that when existence is in danger, the organism is in a state of need (when the biological necessities for existence are not being met) so the organism begins to fashion means of reducing that need. He argues further that the internal state of the organism is a necessary part of learning and that the link is stimulus-organism- response (S-O-R). It is the internal state of the organism that determines whether it will learn (behave) or not.

It is based on this fact that the behavioural model used for this research on child abuse is anchored on the stimulus- organism-environment-response model. In the model, parental cultural belief and socio-economic status constitute the stimulus (S), child abuse which results from the interaction of the independent variables constitutes response (R) while between the stimulus and responses exist the organism (O) factors which act as a mediator between the stimulus and response. The organismic factors are the moderator variables which have the power to influence the relationship between the primary independent variables and the dependent variable. The organismic factors or variables selected by the researcher are parental marital status and gender.

III. Methods

3.1 Participants of the Study

The participants of the study include parents in Delta Central Senatorial District. A total of 500 participated in the study. They were selected through a multistage sampling method; the first sampling stage selected 4 Local Government Areas from the existing 8 Local Government Areas of Delta Central Senatorial District. This was done through simple random sampling technique. In the second stage, 20 communities from the 4 Local Government Areas (5 communities from each Local Government Area) were selected through cluster sampling technique. The third sampling stage selected a total of 25 households from each community making a total of 500 households. This was done using a convenience sampling technique; that is, only households where there are children, who are living with their parents were selected.

3.2 Measures

A self-constructed questionnaire was used for data collection in this study. The questionnaire was titled Questionnaire on Parental Cultural Belief, Parental Religious Belief and Child Abuse (QPCBPRBCA). It contained 2 sections. Section A contained the demographic data of the respondents such as marital status and gender while section B contained Cultural Belief Scale (CBS), Religious Belief Rating Scale (RBRS) and Child Abuse Rating Scale (CARS).

The CBRS contained 18 items, which measured the cultural beliefs of parents as it relates to child upbringing. The items were structured on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 for strongly disagree to 4 for strongly agree. To get the cultural belief score of participants, the total score of participants in the 18 items were summed up using SPSS transform function. The RBRS contained 14 items, which measured the religious beliefs of parents about child upbringing. They were structured on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 for strongly disagree to

4 for strongly agree. The CARS contained 35 items, which measured the extent to which parents are involved in child abuse. They were structured in line with the forms of child abuse, as suggested by Gesinde (2018). The forms include physical abuse, sexual abuse and child neglect. They were structured on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 for strongly disagree to 4 for strongly agree.

The instrument was validated by experts who assessed it for appropriateness and suitability to the objective of the study, and their suggestions were effected. A measure of internal consistency was used to estimate the reliability of the instrument. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient obtained include 0.87, 0.79 and 0.91 for Cultural Belief Scale (CBS), Religious Belief Rating Scale (RBRS) and Child Abuse Rating Scale (CARS) respectively.

3.3 Procedure

This study adopted a correlational research design. The dependent variable in the study is child abuse, measured with a self-constructed Child Abuse Rating Scale (CARS); the independent variables include Parental cultural belief and parental socio-economic status; while the moderating variables include parental marital status and gender. There is also another variable, the mediating variable, which is a parental religious belief. The questionnaire was administered to the respondents directly by the researcher with the help of 3 research assistants. The data obtained were analysed with multiple regression at 0.05 level of significance.

IV. Result

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the variables

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Cultural Belief	500	18.00	72.00	55.05	9.47	-.54	.31
Religious Belief	500	14.00	56.00	41.34	7.63	-.50	.49
Physical Abuse	500	18.00	60.00	38.37	6.58	.04	-.00
Sexual Abuse	500	20.00	56.00	43.84	6.12	-.32	.24
Child Neglect	500	6.00	24.00	19.32	2.97	-.54	.62

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the variables used in the study. The statistics conducted include minimum, maximum, mean, *SD*, skewness and kurtosis. The skewness and kurtosis statistics were conducted to assess the data, to see if they were normally distributed. While skewness estimates the symmetry of the distribution, kurtosis is an indication of the 'peakedness' of the distribution (Pallant, 2005). The value obtained from skewness and kurtosis could either be positive or negative. A negative value indicates that scores are gathered at the right-hand side of the distribution while a positive value indicates that scores are clustered at the left-hand side of the distribution.

Table 2: Gender Difference in Child Abuse among Parents

Variables	Male N=271		Female N=229		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Physical Abuse	38.63	6.68	38.05	6.47	.98	.33	.002
Sexual Abuse	44.14	5.96	43.48	6.30	1.21	.23	0.003
Child Neglect	19.21	2.91	19.44	3.04	.84	.40	0.001

Table 2 shows the gender differences of parents in the three forms of child abuse. The results show $t(498) = 0.98, p > 0.05$; $t(498) = 1.21, p > 0.05$; and $t(498) = 0.84, p > 0.05$, for physical abuse, sexual abuse and child neglect, respectively. This result has shown that parents did not differ significantly in the three forms of child abuse based on gender. The magnitude of difference in the means, as calculated in the eta squared, was very small (Physical Abuse = 0.002; sexual abuse = 0.003; and child neglect = 0.001).

Table 3: Marital Status Difference in Child Abuse among Parents

Variables		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Physical Abuse	Between Groups	300.89	3	100.30			
	Within Groups	21271.27	495	42.97	2.33	.07	.01
	Total	21572.15	498				
Sexual Abuse	Between Groups	134.91	3	44.97			
	Within Groups	18555.65	496	37.41	1.20	.31	.01
	Total	18690.55	499				
Child Neglect	Between Groups	31.03	3	10.34			
	Within Groups	4361.04	496	8.79	1.18	.32	.01
	Total	4392.07	499				

Table 3 presents the difference in child abuse among parents based on marital status. The result shows $F(2, 497) = 2.33, p > 0.05$; $F(2, 497) = 1.20, p > 0.05$; and $F(2, 497) = 1.18, p > 0.05$, for physical abuse, sexual abuse and child neglect, respectively. This result has shown that there was no statistically significant difference in the three forms of child abuse among parents based on their marital status. The effect size, as calculated with eta squared showed that the magnitude of differences was too small. Eta squared = .01.

Table 4: Relationship between Cultural Belief, Religious Belief and Child Abuse

Measures	Correlation				
	Cultural Belief	Religious Belief	Physical Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Child Neglect
Cultural Belief	-				
Religious Belief	.15 ($p = .01$)	-			
Physical Abuse	.25 ($p = .00$)	.50 ($p = .00$)	-		
Sexual Abuse	.28 ($p = .00$)	.34 ($p = .00$)	.54 ($p = .00$)	-	
Child Neglect	.18 ($p = .00$)	.35 ($p = .00$)	.30 ($p = .00$)	.53 ($p = .00$)	-

***Independent Variables:** Cultural Belief, Religious Belief

***Dependent Variables:** Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Child Neglect

Table 4 shows a correlation matrix of the variables used in the study. The result showed a significant positive relationship between cultural belief and religious belief, $r(498) = .15, p < 0.05$; cultural belief and physical abuse $r(498) = .25, p < 0.05$; cultural belief and sexual abuse $r(498) = .28, p < 0.05$; cultural belief and child neglect $r(498) = .18, p < 0.05$; religious belief and physical abuse $r(498) = .50, p < 0.05$; religious belief and sexual abuse $r(498) = .34, p < 0.05$; religious belief and child neglect $r(498) = .35, p < 0.05$; physical abuse and sexual abuse $r(498) = .54, p < 0.05$; physical abuse and child neglect $r(498) = .30, p < 0.05$; sexual abuse and child neglect $r(498) = .53, p < 0.05$. This result suggests that all the variables in the study are statistically related.

Table 5: Relationship between Cultural Belief, Religious Belief and Child Abuse after controlling for marital status and gender

Measures	Correlation				
	Cultural Belief	Religious Belief	Physical Abuse	Sexual Abuse	Child Neglect
Cultural Belief	-				
Religious Belief	.12 ($p = .01$)	-			
Physical Abuse	.25 ($p = .00$)	0.51 ($p = .00$)	-		
Sexual Abuse	.26 ($p = .00$)	0.32 ($p = .00$)	0.54 ($p = .00$)	-	
Child Neglect	.19 ($p = .00$)	0.36 ($p = .00$)	0.30 ($p = .00$)	0.55 ($p = .00$)	-

***Independent Variables:** Cultural Belief, Religious Belief

***Dependent Variables:** Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Child Neglect

***Controlled Variables: Marital Status, Gender**

In table 5, the relationship between cultural belief, religious belief and the three forms of child abuse were computed, while statistically controlling for marital status and gender. The result showed that, after controlling for the possible moderating impact of marital status and gender, a significant relationship still exists between cultural belief and religious belief, $r(498) = .12, p < 0.05$; cultural belief and physical abuser $r(498) = .25, p < 0.05$; cultural belief and sexual abuser $r(498) = .26, p < 0.05$; cultural belief and child neglect $r(498) = .19, p < 0.05$; religious belief and physical abuser $r(498) = .51, p < 0.05$; religious belief and sexual abuser $r(498) = .32, p < 0.05$; religious belief and child neglect $r(498) = .36, p < 0.05$; physical abuse and sexual abuser $r(498) = .54, p < 0.05$; physical abuse and child neglect $r(498) = .30, p < 0.05$; sexual abuse and child neglect $r(498) = .55, p < 0.05$. This result suggests that although there were slight changes in the correlation coefficient, marital status and gender did not moderate the relationship between the cultural belief, religious belief and the three forms of child abuse among the study participants.

V. Discussion

This study was aimed to determine the nature of the relationship that exists between parental cultural belief, parental religious belief and child abuse and the moderating role of gender and marital status of the parents. This study was influenced by the rate of child abuse reported and observed in Nigeria. What is worrisome is that most of these parents have no idea that most of their practices towards their children constitute child abuse. The study found that child abuse is practised by both male and female parents. It was found that on all forms of child abuse, parents did not differ concerning their gender. In other words, gender did not influence the child abuse practice among parents in the study sample. This finding is at variance with the position of Hunter (2000); Browne (2002); Starling and Holden (2000); and Finkelhor (1994) that gender is a predictor of child abuse.

The study also revealed that marital status does not influence child abuse practices among parents and that irrespective of marital status, child abuse was reported by parents in the study sample. This finding contradicts the position of Mash and Wolfe (2016) that child abuse is a fallout of marital conflict.

The study further showed a positive significant relationship between parental cultural belief and child abuse. This implies that parents' whose cultural beliefs permit the treatment of children as members of the household who must contribute to the economic and social wellbeing of the family are very likely to abuse their children. This is in line with the position of D'Antonio, Darwish and McLean (1993) that child abuse is prevalent in a culture where children are valued for their economic usefulness.

The study also found that religious belief has a positive significant relationship with child abuse. The study has shown that parents who hold the religious belief that children should be given corporal punishment as a corrective measure are very likely to abuse their children physically (Bottoms, Shaver, Goodman, & Qin, 1995; Ellison & Sherkat, 1993).

In terms of the moderating impact of marital status and gender of parents, the study found that marital status and gender have no moderating impact on the relationship that exists among cultural belief, religious

belief and child abuse. This finding confirms the earlier findings that parents reported child abuse irrespective of their marital status and gender.

VI. Conclusion

Arising from the findings of the study, the researcher, therefore, concluded that child abuse may be a fallout of several cultural and religious beliefs often practised by parents either consciously or unconsciously in an attempt to either discipline or make the child a better person in life.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study has provided useful information on the state of child abuse among parents in Nigeria and its possible relationship with religious belief and cultural practices, the researcher fears the homogenous nature of the participants (i.e. they are from cultures that have coexisted for generations and are predominantly Christians). The researchers are, however, optimistic that more rigorous studies with heterogeneous participants will confirm the findings of the study, and therefore provide easier generalisation.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest is declared in this study.

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