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To cite this version:
Catherine Pellenq, Suzan Gunn, Janessa Graves, Mohamed Vaqas Ali. Mental health of child workers: Results from a case control study of the brick manufacturing industry in four countries. 142th meeting of the American Public Health Association, Nov 2014, New Orleans, United States. hal-01292661
Mental Health of Child Workers
Results from a case control study of the brick manufacturing industry in four countries

Catherine PELLENQ*, Susan GUNN**, Janessa GRAVES***, Mohammed VAQAS ALI****

Background
Internationally, brick kilns employ tens of thousands of children. Due to extreme poverty facing families who work in this industry, child labor in this sector has been challenging to eliminate. If work has known effects on physical health of the children, does it affect their mental health as well? One reason that there is little hard evidence of the impact of work on psycho-social development of children is because there has been no methodology for assessing it. This cross-national, field-based study was conducted by the International Labour Organization in four countries – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan – to address this issue.

Objectives
1. Developing and testing a questionnaire that can be used cross-culturally and by non-professionals to assess the psychosocial health of working children.
2. Determining the nature and extent of the impact of work on children’s psychosocial functioning and development by comparing working children with non-working controls.

Method
Working children were identified from up to 3 brick kiln sites in each country. They were compared to non-working controls recruited from nearby communities. Clinical tests, risk assessment tables, and a structured questionnaire were administered to the children outside the working site.

The IPAC (Instrument for the Psychosocial Assessment of Children at Work) was developed to collect working children’s perceptions on different areas of their lives and is composed of 48 items (17 specific for working children). The children’s responses were tabulated on a frequency Likert scale (never, sometimes, often and always). Pictograms could be used to facilitate answering of younger children.

Participants: 1608 children (11-17 yrs) were randomly selected from brick kilns in the 4 countries. 918 of these were working children who have worked at least 2 years in the brick kilns. 666 were non-working controls matched for age, sex, economic level, migration status, ethnic, social or linguistic group.

Results 1
1. Validation of the tool
38 items were kept; the reliability for the tool was quite good (alpha of Cronbach >.80) and varies among countries from .71 to .87.

A Principal Component Analysis (Varimax after rotation) identified 6 main factors: 3 concerning all children, 3 concerning only working children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6 MAIN FACTORS</th>
<th>Examples of questions</th>
<th>Load on factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stress at work</td>
<td>Do you get bored at work doing the same thing for many hours in a row?</td>
<td>.729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem at work</td>
<td>Do you feel like you have the skills needed to do your job well?</td>
<td>.702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision at work</td>
<td>Do you think others appreciate the work you do?</td>
<td>.670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal security</td>
<td>Do you feel supported and loved by your family?</td>
<td>.455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotions</td>
<td>Do you get very angry and often lose your temper?</td>
<td>.723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maltreatment</td>
<td>Have you been severely punished for mistakes made at your work?</td>
<td>.778</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results show that IPAC is a valid tool for measuring psychosocial well-being of working children. it can be used in other settings and with other occupations.

Results 2
2. Differences between working and non-working children on the three last psychosocial factors (variance analysis)

Lower personal security: Significant difference. F(1455,1)=87.13, p<.000
Higher negative emotions: Significant difference. F(1441,1)=64.33, p<.000
Higher feeling of maltreatment: Significant difference. F(1469,1)=44.78, p<.000

Compared to their non-working peers, brick kiln workers feel significantly less secure and experience more negative emotions and maltreatment.

This conclusion is derived from the global analysis of the data (and is confirmed by regression analyses not presented here). There are also indications of interacting effects of other variables.

For example, our data indicate that, compared with other countries, Afghanistan shows considerable difference between working and non-working children on negative emotions.

Results 3
3. The mental health of working children
Brick kiln workers also have low self-esteem (80% are never proud of their work, 73% feel they do not have the skills needed to do the job well). They are likely to experience stress (60% feel tired because of long or heavy work, get bored at work doing the same thing, 82% have no free time).

They may be suffering more injuries from lack of supervision (72% feel nobody watches over them, make sure they do not get hurt, 66% feel no one teaches them what to do and how to do).

Low personal agency: they feel unable to influence what is happening to them (66% feel that they cannot choose what to do or not to do).

As for the country variable, there are indications in our data of interactional effects between psychosocial factors and sex for the working children, with girls having lower self-esteem at work (except in Pakistan).

Conclusions
As a result of this study, it is obvious that there is a negative impact of early brick kiln work on psychosocial development. There is also some indication, however, that other variables such as sex, country, age, work intensity, schooling, family and social support may modulate these effects to some extent but further work is required to demonstrate this conclusively.

This evidence-based study provides new rationales and impetus for parents, brick kiln operators, and policy makers who seek to remove children from this work.

Acknowledgements
This study was funded by the International Labour Organization and the collaborators in this study come from: Laboratoire Sciences Education, Grenoble University, France**; International Labour Organization, Geneva, Switzerland***; Washington State University, Pullman, USA****; Punjab University, Lahore, Pakistan*****

References

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