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This paper examines how sociological factors contribute to child physical abuse within families, and how these factors impact children's social development, with a focus on Singapore context. It unravels how cultural norms regarding physical discipline blurs the lines between discipline and child abuse, which increases the occurrence of such abuse. Utilising Conflict Theory, economic pressures faced by families, especially those of lower income are seen as a contributing element towards child abuse. The paper also discusses the impact of physical abuse on a child's social development. Through Symbolic Interactionism, Mead's Theory of "I" and "Self" and the Looking Glass self, it showcases how physical abuse affects a child's self-perception and identity formation. Additionally, the paper integrates Socialisation theory to highlight how abused children have a higher likelihood of modelling the abusive behaviours from their parents. Incorporating these sociological concepts into this topic provide fresh and different perspectives as it reveals a deeper layer of how the abuse starts and occurs in families. It is essential to identify the root causes and consequences of such abuse. This enables the creation of more detailed interventions to protect the abused children and others who are at risk.

This essay assignment was submitted as part of a graded assessment for SOCG001:

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**In this paper, I aim to explore how sociological factors contribute to child physical abuse within families, and how these factors impact children's social development.**

Every child deserves to grow up in a safe and loving environment, where they feel belonging to. However, this is not the case for all children, as the invincible arms of sociological factors shape the cruel realities of child physical abuse in families. As devastating as it sounds for a child to withstand such abuse, imagine the long-lasting impacts of these scars? Child abuse ranges from physical, sexual to neglect. This paper will examine how sociological factors contribute to child physical abuse and the resulting impact it has on children. As seen in Appendix A, the amount of physical abuse cases investigated between 2009 and 2017 was one of the highest in Singapore (Chan, 2018). Additionally, physical abuse accounted for 55 percent of child abuse cases in 2004 (Goh, 2005). This illustrates the high prevalence of child physical abuse in Singapore. It is an important issue to tackle, especially since the younger generation will be the future of their society.

Family will be the first party that children socialise with. Socialisation describes that family is the primary socialisation agent for a child, where they learn about societal values and behaviours from their family (Foote, 2000). It signifies that family has a huge influence in shaping a child's early years (Karkashadze et al., 2023). This highlights the importance of a nurturing environment that a family should provide to the child, as it emphasises how family plays a crucial role in shaping their child's developmental and social outcomes.

In Singaporean families, physical punishment is normalised as a form of discipline for children (Ngiam and Tung, 2016). Symbolic Interactionism illustrates that physical punishment, such as caning is a symbol that is socially constructed in Singaporean culture. Over 80 percent of Singaporean children experienced physical discipline in their childhood

(Sudo et al., 2023). It perpetuates into family structures and is commonly used today. While physical discipline is widely accepted, could there be a boundary distinguishing between physical discipline and child physical abuse? Local legal systems struggle to strike a balance between parental responsibility and the need to protect children from physical punishment that borders on abuse (Leong, 2014). As physical discipline is a culture in Asian households, the lines are blurred between punishment and abuse. Despite acknowledging the negative impacts, many parents still utilise physical discipline due to its commonality (Lim et al., 2022). Symbolic Interactionism demonstrates how the cultural meanings attached to physical discipline in Singapore make parents inclined to use it. However, research indicates that the acceptance of physical punishment is associated with a higher risk of escalating disciplinary measures, potentially leading to abuse (Russa and Rodriguez, 2010). Hence, it can be perceived how the strong forces of cultural meanings attached to physical discipline make parents accept and ultimately choose such discipline methods. Additionally, parents who experienced physical discipline find it acceptable and use them on their children (Choo et al., 2022). This can be explained through socialisation theory, where it suggests that parents who were caned as children view physical punishment as appropriate. Since it was normalised and common in their socialisation as a child, they adopt these patterns from their parents, creating a cycle of intergenerational abuse. For instance, in 2020, a Singaporean man caned his three-year-old son excessively, leaving one to 10 centimetres of cane marks all over his body (Lam, 2021). This exacerbates an example when caning escalates into child physical abuse. Research substantiates that the risk of child physical abuse increasing significantly as parents physically discipline their children (Gershoff, 2010). Additionally, a study revealed that 21 percent of children presenting with non-accidental injuries had cane marks, indicating a direct link between caning and physical harm (Chew et

al., 2018). With the cultural norms reinforcing physical discipline in parents and the socialisation theory normalising such discipline, it further enhances the relation between physical discipline and the likelihood of escalation to child physical abuse.

Economic stressors inevitably contribute to child physical abuse. In Singapore, price pressures surged from 4 percent in January 2022 to 5.4 percent in May 2022 (Chow-Tan, 2023). Conflict Theory discusses those broader societal conflicts; like economic stressors that cause physical abuse to occur in families (Witt, 1987). It states that economic challenges and systemic inequalities increase stress in families, creating conditions for child physical abuse. Conflict theory acknowledges that societal issues increase the likelihood of abuse, instead of faulting parents for it. Income inequality in Singapore is not just because the rich are getting wealthier faster, but rather low-wage workers continue to stay behind (Neo and Ng, 2020). Conflict Theory suggests that society is structured around power struggles between different social classes, with wealth and resources unequally distributed. It also reveals that systemic inequalities leave the disadvantaged population, such as low-income families to struggle with fulfilling basic needs (Rothschild, n.d.). Research has shown that child abuse cases are more than 50 percent higher in families with an income of less than 2000 dollars per month, and that economically insecure children experience three to nine times more abuse than economically secure children (Conrad-Hiebner and Byram, 2018a). Such low-income families can be viewed as the lower class, where they earn lower income and have lesser educational backgrounds. Economic disparities correlate with higher rates of child physical abuse (Conrad-Hiebner and Scanlon, 2015). This showcases that families facing economic challenges often experience heightened stress, which increases tendencies of abusive behaviours. Conflict theory also states that inequality can lead to broader social unrest, as marginalized groups may react against systemic injustices, further complicating reform

initiatives (Kanbur, 2007). This perspective emphasizes the competition for scarce resources, such as wealth and education, where the privileged often dominate, leaving disadvantaged groups to face systemic barriers that exacerbate their struggles (Chen, 2024). As societal structures essentially create inequality, it forms chronic stress in low-income families, leading to higher chance of child physical abuse. While research indicates that economic stress in low-income families cause child physical abuse, another perspective to consider could be that these parents utilise such measures because they realise that it is the fastest and easiest way to discipline their child, especially since they spend most of their time working. With parents facing immense economic stress, their physical discipline could inevitably escalate to physical abuse. Most low-income parents view physical punishment as an effective method for discipline (Adams, 2020) and although some are aware of non-violent discipline methods, they often lack the resources and support to implement these strategies (Duong et al., 2021). However, conflict theory suggests that the persistent economic stress in low-income families fundamentally drives the cycle of stress, resulting in the occurrence of child physical abuse.

The impacts on child physical abuse on children are long-lasting, where their identity formation and self-perception are affected. Symbolic Interactionism discusses how the behaviours by parents are viewed as symbols for children to interpret. Children who view their caretakers as supportive and loving are more likely to establish a secure self (Chong et al., 2023). This showcases the importance of the treatment provided to the child because the way a family treats their child determines how the child perceives themselves. When interacting with their children, abusive parents frequently have biases that cause them to misunderstand the needs of their children (Camilo et al., 2020). Children then internalise these misinterpretations, giving rise to self-blame and unfavorable self-attributions

(Klebanov et al., 2020). For abused children, they interpret their parents' behaviours and see it as unloving, which then communicates feelings of unworthiness.

Mead's theory of the self accentuates this through the interplay of "I" and "Me". With parents being the child's first socialisation agents, the "Me" in Mead's Concept of Self is heavily influenced by their interactions with their parents and is shaped by the attitudes and expectations of others (Granberg, 2018). In the context of physical abuse, the child absorbs the caregiver's abusive actions and words, interpreting them as a reflection of who they are. This affects the child's "Me" as it gets dominated by the abuser's negative feedback. The "I", represents individuality and spontaneity. Physical abuse greatly affects a child's self-worth, often leading them to feel worthless (Downey and Crummy, 2022). This negatively impacts the child's "I", as lack of self-worth makes children suppress their individuality (Srivastava, 2014). When they lack individuality, they think lesser of themselves, in turn affecting their self-perception and identity formation.

To further substantiate, the 'Looking Glass-Self' explains that people construct their self-image based on how they are perceived by others (Cook and Douglas, 1998). Children view themselves based on how they think other people see them, but this perspective is distorted in abusive situations. Depending on the attitudes of their parents, children's self-concept can either stabilize or destabilize because they match it with how they think their parents see them (Kawash et al., 1985), illustrating how a child's self-perception is impacted.

Consequently, studies showed that individuals who were victimised in childhood tend to have a perception of lower self-esteem in adulthood (Pereira et al., 2021). With children thinking of themselves lowly, it exemplifies low levels of self-confidence as an individual.

This signifies how child physical abuse has detrimental long-lasting effects on a child's identity formation and self-perception.

As mentioned that family is their first socialisation agent, socialisation theory reiterates that physically abused children may imitate behaviours from their abusive parents, resulting in aggressive and antisocial actions. However, adopting such behaviours can impact their social development. For instance, child physical abuse was positively related with engagements in school fights, which was strongly correlated with displaying deviant behaviours (Tyler and Schmitz, 2015). It can be seen how children pick up violent tendencies like fights because they replicate the patterns they were exposed to at home during their socialisation with their family. Additionally, childhood maltreatment predicted intimate partner violence victimization and perpetration in young adulthood, and it was found to be linked with higher rates of excessive alcohol use in adulthood (Gomez, 2010). Their unhealthy coping mechanisms could stem from their feelings of worthlessness; hence resulting in self-destructive behaviours. Victims of childhood abuse may resort to heavy drinking as a maladaptive coping mechanism, which can perpetuate cycles of violence (Ullman and Sigurvinsdottir, 2015). The normalization of violence and aggression in their childhood not only disrupts their ability to form healthy social bonds but also increases generational cycles of violence (Ray et al., 2017). Thus, socialization theory emphasizes how childhood abuse behaviors solidify and impact a child's present conduct, as well as their long-term social development. A case study in Singapore portrayed an example of deviant behaviours adopted by victims. In 2022, a 19-year-old son killed his father who had been physically and verbally abusing him since young (Lum, 2024). This illustrates the antisocial behaviours the child adopted during his socialisation in childhood with his parents. However, it is essential to recognise that not all individuals who were physically abused in their

childhood partake in deviant behaviours. Symbolic Interactionism discusses that engaging in positive interactions with others will enable abuse survivors to form a new self-concept that emphasizes growth and strength instead of victimhood (Fuller-Thomson et al., 2023). This means that engaging in positive experiences helps victims reframe and reinterpret their trauma, as new meanings are assigned to their experiences. It is suggested that resilience and outside support networks are essential for ending the cycle of abuse (Schelbe and Geiger, 2016).

Engaging in similar behaviours from their abusive parents, child physical abuse victims get labelled, which stigmatises them and influences their future interactions. Labelling theory emphasises that the labels individuals receive significantly impacts their self-concept and behavior. In the case of child abuse, victims are often labelled as “troubled” or “broken,” creating a stigma that follows them throughout. It was reported that victims feel shame, self-blame and anticipated discrimination, leading to avoidance of help (Elliott et al., 2005). As victims are stigmatised, it evokes a greater desire to socially distance themselves (Schomerus et al., 2021). It illustrates that when a child is labelled by society, they act according to the label, where they avoid seeking help and socially isolate themselves. These outcomes have further repercussions, where children start to face difficulties in their social development. Children show increased difficulties with both self-esteem and peer relationships and that those with low self-esteem are less likely to be socially integrated (Elliott et al., 2005). Being unable to socialise with others directly impacts their social development, where fostering of healthy relationships with others toughen. This reveals how the label attached to these physically abused children affects their social development throughout life.



Singapore has laws like the Children and Young Persons Act 1993 (Pathy et al., 2014) to protect children in need. However, it is crucial to understand the factors building up to this social issue. Identifying the contributing forces can unravel a deeper and different layer of perspectives that aid Singapore's society in noting the root causes to child physical abuse. This can improve the current approach to solutions for this social issue. It is cruel that some children experience physical abuse at a tender age, hence more light should be shed on this topic to increase awareness in society.

(2199 words)

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## Appendix

Appendix A: Graph of Child abuse cases investigated (2009 – 2017)

