



Implicit measures of child abuse and neglect: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

Interest in child maltreatment research has been growing in the last two decades. The main approach underlying this research has relied upon self and family reports. These methods may be problematic because they often require conscious awareness, generate socially desirable over accurate responses or can be biased by parents' unrealistic expectations, misattributions and perceptual errors. Simultaneously, research has been adapting methods from social cognition research in an attempt to access the implicit and spontaneous processes underlying the information processing related to parent–child interactions, exploring parental cognitions and emotions that may constitute important contributions to explain abusive and neglectful parenting.

In this paper we review the research on child abuse and neglect using implicit measures. Using combinations of words related with child abuse and neglect, and with autonomic and affective variables assessed by the implicit measures, we have conducted a systematic review of 33 studies, and we examined the variables explored, the type of measures used and the results obtained.

The research reviewed points out the importance of assessing parental representations in parent–child interactions and analyzing the differences between maltreating and non-maltreating parents. Specifically, physically abusive parents tend to show more difficulties in recognizing children's emotions, reveal more biases in their perceptions and attributions about children and behave more aggressively. Further research with maltreating parents, namely neglectful, using implicit measures is still required.

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1. Introduction

Child abuse and neglect constitute the most common types of child maltreatment, with long-term impacts on child development (De Paúl

& Guibert, 2008; Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). While aggressive behavior is the hallmark of abusive parenting, child neglect is characterized by parental omissions regarding child physical and educational needs or failure to provide sufficient supervision. Over the last two decades, child maltreatment has been a topic of interest for many researchers involved in the study of the complex and often private dynamics of families' daily interactions. However, the main approaches underlying this assessment, frequently based on self-report and observational measures, are known to be influenced by a set of variables that often do not allow the accurate assessment of the parental cognitions that may shape parental abusive or neglectful behaviors (e.g., Russa & Rodriguez, 2010). More recently, and based on a social information processing model applied to child maltreatment (Crittenden, 1993; Milner, 1993, 2003), some researchers have been employing methods adapted from social cognition research, in an attempt to access the implicit and spontaneous information processing underlying child maltreatment. This paper aims to present a systematic review of the research conducted on child maltreatment using these types of methods that, along with self-report and observational methods, may contribute to a more effective comprehension of the phenomena.

1.1. Assessing child abuse and neglect

Child abuse and neglect has long been a topic in the literature but it is only during the 90s that the scientific community started to focus the research on the definition and evaluation of abusive parenting (e.g. Cicchetti, 1991; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1995; Dubowitz, Klockner, Starr, & Black, 1998; Milner, 1993).

Abuse and neglect are among the most prevalent forms of maltreatment. Internationally, the *World Report on Violence and Health* (WHO, 2002) gives an account of the large number of deaths of children due to parental neglect and abuse, particularly in the age group between 0 and 4 years old. For example, in Portugal in 2013, there were 18,910 child neglect cases referenced to child protection services (almost 30% of the references), and 6864 cases of physical and emotional abuse (about 16%; Comissão de Proteção de Crianças e Jovens, 2014; Camilo & Garrido, 2013). However, if we consider the likelihood of unreported cases, as well as the constraints in identifying these cases, these numbers are probably underestimated.

The assessment of maltreating parental practices remains therefore a big challenge for researchers and professionals. The traditional approaches used in child abuse and neglect domain have been observational methods or self and family reports (Russa & Rodriguez, 2010; see Calheiros, Garrido, Lopes, & Patrício, 2015; Garrido, Patrício, Calheiros, & Lopes, 2016 for reports by laypersons and professionals). These metrics depend upon a conscious awareness of feelings, cognitions and behaviors towards the child and are influenced by social desirability (e.g. Fazio & Olson, 2003; Greenwald et al., 2002), in an attempt to avoid social judgments or even legal intervention (Portwood, 2006). Moreover, maltreating parents may have unrealistic expectations, perceptual biases about their interactions with their children, or misattribute their children's behavior (Hansen & MacMillan, 1990; Lau, Valeri, McCarty, & Weisz, 2006) that influence the reports. There are also problems associated with retrospective reporting, namely memory distortions caused by time passage or by the informant's knowledge of subsequent events (Bauer & Twentyman, 1985), making these type of reports susceptible to misrepresentation (Fazio & Olson, 2003).

Recently, in the context of child maltreatment, a social information-processing model has been applied to parent-child interactions, suggesting that abusive and neglectful parents may incur in biases or errors in the information processing during these interactions (Crittenden, 1993; Milner, 1993, 2003). In this model, parental cognitive representations are a key element in the explanation of child abuse and neglect. These cognitive representations refer to the knowledge structures that help people organize their experiences and respond to stimulus events.

Furthermore, they are characterized by their automaticity and low level of awareness (Bugental, 1992; Sigel, 1985) because "knowledge that is deeply processed, and routinized and easily activated will be automatized" (McGillicuddy-DeLisi & Sigel, 1995, p. 347). In the implicit social cognition literature, these representations are understood as *implicit cognitions*, that include unconscious effects of past experiences on feelings, thoughts and actions (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995) or evaluations with an unknown origin, that are activated in an automatic manner, which may influence people's responses in an uncontrollable manner (Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000).

In order to reduce the influence that explicit assessment techniques usually have on participant's candor and accuracy (Fazio & Olson, 2003), implicit measures may constitute an important way to assess parental cognitive representations. As a way to infer mental contents without asking directly for a verbal report, implicit measures reveal the spontaneous influence cognitive representations have on behavior (De Houwer, 2006; Fazio & Olson, 2003).

1.2. Implicit measures

Current theory and research offers a very well established set of experimental paradigms that provide access to cognitive processes occurring beyond conscious awareness using implicit measures (e.g. Gawronski, 2009; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). In these implicit means of assessment, individuals are less certain of what is being assessed or how scores are measured, and thus providing a better experimental control (Fazio & Olson, 2003).

The characterization of these paradigms is dependent on several factors. Namely, the inherent automaticity in the procedures, the level of awareness of the mental process, the level of intentionality (control of the person over the starting of the mental process), the level of controllability (control of the person over the ending of the mental process), and the overall level of cognitive load present (Bargh, 1994). In an attempt to measure individual differences in psychological phenomena, implicit measures have been particularly important in the study of attitudes, stereotypes, close relationships and health behavior (for a review, see Fazio & Olson, 2003).

Priming paradigms are very popular in social psychology and are often used as an implicit measure to assess what is activated from memory during the presentation of some attitude object. Early studies began with semantic priming (Meyer & Schvaneveldt, 1971), inferring that the presentation of a stimulus that activates related concepts in memory, reduces the time to identify those concepts. For example, *nurse* is recognized more quickly following *doctor* than following *bread*. Very similar to this is the evaluative priming paradigm, based on the assumption that the automatic activation of the evaluation associated with a prime produces a processing advantage for evaluatively congruent targets (Fazio & Olson, 2003). Therefore, participants are faster to identify a positive target when the prime is positive, and faster to identify a negative target when the prime is negative. For example, when primed with "cockroach" participants are quicker to identify a negative target word (i.e., "disgusting") as negative, but are slower to identify a positive target word (e.g., "appealing") as positive (e.g., Fazio, Sanbonmatsu, Powell, & Kardes, 1986). Priming techniques therefore reveal the influence of the accessibility of a schema (prime-related mental constructs) in information processing activities (encoding, interpretations, response selection; Bargh & Chartrand, 2000). Other popular implicit measures include the Implicit Association Test (e.g., Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998); Affect Misattribution Procedure (e.g., Payne, Cheng, Govorun, & Stewart, 2005); Approach/Avoidance Tasks (e.g., Solarz, 1960; Chen & Bargh, 1999); Go/No Go Association Task (e.g., Nosek & Banaji, 2001), among others.

Psychophysiological approaches (e.g., Cacioppo, Petty, & Andersen, 1988) such as facial electromyography, startle eye blink, blood pressure, heart rate and skin conductance, also constitute implicit measures with applications in several research areas. These techniques assess the

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