Community interaction and child maltreatment

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ABSTRACT

The way in which parents interact with their environment may have implications for their likelihood of abuse and neglect. This study examines the parent–environment relationship through community involvement and perception, using social disorganization theory. We hypothesize mothers who participate in their communities and have positive perceptions of them may be less likely to maltreat their children because of the potential protective capacity of neighborhood supports. Using information from the 5 year Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study ($n = 2991$), the mother's self-reported acts of psychological and physical maltreatment and neglect are measured. A mother's community involvement index is the number of community activities a mother was involved in, and community perception is measured by two five-item Likert scales assessing perception of community collective efficacy. We analyze the relationship between community variables and each of mother's maltreatment behaviors as well as the interaction between community factors using a series of nested logistic regressions. Higher levels of community involvement are associated with lower levels of psychological aggression. More positive perception of community social control is associated with lower levels of physical assault. A moderation effect of community perception suggests that a mother's perception of her community changes the relationship between community involvement and psychological child abuse. The results provide important policy and empirical implications to build positive and supportive communities as a protective factor in child maltreatment. Getting parents involved in their communities can improve the environment in which children and families develop, and decrease the likelihood that maltreatment will occur.

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Introduction

Despite a host of prevention efforts, child maltreatment continues to be a problem. According to an annual report of child maltreatment issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), an estimated 2 million children across the country received an investigation or assessment and about 681,000 children (9.1 victims per 1000 children in the population) were estimated to have been victims of maltreatment during FFY 2011 (DHHS, 2012).

In an attempt to understand how to prevent maltreatment, many researchers have examined the risk factors for abuse and neglect (Black, Heyman, & Smith Slep, 2001a; Black, Heyman, & Smith Slep, 2001b; Black, Smith Slep, & Heyman, 2001; Schumacher, Slep, & Heyman, 2001; Slack et al., 2011; Stith et al., 2009). These factors involve characteristics of the child and parent(s), and the context in which families live. One of the contextual factors for child maltreatment addresses how parents interact with their environment. Specifically, previous literature has found that abusing parents were more likely to

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have few peer relationships, limited contact with the wider community, and challenging relationships with relatives (Corse, Schmid, & Trickett, 1990; Salzinger, Kaplan, & Artemyeff, 1983).

Although there is a significant body of literature on social support and social isolation that examines the number and quality of connections with others, studies have not considered the role of a mother's involvement within her community as a potential protective factor in maltreatment. Community involvement includes participation in religious or social groups, events held at schools, community centers, and local institutes, as well as social connections with neighbors. We consider community involvement as a social process, which involves interactions between individuals and communities (Freisthler, Merritt, & LaScala, 2006). Participation within one's community may have protective properties above and beyond those of social support. Community involvement may affect parenting behaviors by increasing the number of sources for parents to receive support, advice, and resources they need and also by enhancing the quality and the quantity of their social networks. Parents who are active in their communities may learn positive parenting behaviors from the activities in which they participate and from role modeling from other parents. Additionally, having activities to attend may provide an outlet away from typical daily proceedings within the home, which may be a source of stress relief for some families.

In this study, we seek to examine the parent–environment relationship through community involvement and perception, using social disorganization theory. We consider community involvement, which includes parental participation in events that schools, churches, social clubs, and social service organizations offer as well as parental interpersonal relationships with people in the community. We also consider the parents' perception of their own community in terms of safety and support. The way in which parents perceive their community likely affects the extent to which they participate in their communities, and therefore potentially moderates the relationship between community participation and maltreatment. There are selection problems associated with this neighborhood study, namely that mothers who participate in their communities and have positive perceptions of them may be less likely to maltreat their children based on an array of other factors that are associated with both. We attempt to alleviate this selection problem by controlling for a host of factors related to the mother and child.

Literature review

We rely on social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942) to guide our research. This theory suggests that communities with low economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential instability are distressed and lack the necessary resources and social norms to appropriately socialize children to fully participate in society. The theory originated in crime literature as a means for understanding why rates of juvenile delinquency varied by neighborhood. It has been extended to include the combination of trust among neighbors and shared willingness of neighbors to intervene in problematic situations (i.e., collective efficacy; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Felton, 1997). Some researchers have applied this theory to understand community variation in child maltreatment (Freisthler, 2004; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Molnar, Buka, Brennan, Holton, & Earls, 2003). In this case, it is theorized that distressed neighborhoods may put parents at additional risk for maltreatment because of the multiple stressors they encounter, the overall lack of resources available, and the lack of trust and sense of community amongst neighbors that provide a supportive environment for positive parenting. Parents who live in communities in which they form bonds with neighbors and feel comfortable participating in community events provide additional supports that may prevent them from maltreating their children. Although theory would suggest that community involvement is associated with maltreatment in these ways, this factor has largely been absent from the research on risk and protective factors for maltreatment.

Additionally, we rely on theories connecting perception and behavior to guide the theoretical basis of our study. In crime research, Cohen (1966) pointed out that individuals who perceive their neighborhoods to have high rates of crime are less inclined to participate in them. He writes, "Distrust, even if it is unfounded, weakens organization by undermining motivation; to distrust others is to see one's own effort as pointless, wasted, and foolish, and the future as hazardous and uncertain." (Cohen, 1966, p. 5). Additionally, cognitive behavioral theory suggests that an individual's behavior is affected by the way they perceive their environment (Dobson & Dozois, 2001). Taken together, these theories suggest that parents who perceive their neighborhoods negatively may be less likely to participate in community events or form bonds with neighbors.

As pointed out in a recent literature review of community research and maltreatment, the interaction of parents with their environments, including participation in community activities, has been generally absent from the maltreatment literature (Freisthler et al., 2006). We seek to understand that interaction of parents and their environment by examining both perceptions of community as well as involvement in one's community and their relation to maltreatment. Specifically, we hypothesize that as mothers are more involved and have a better perception of their communities, they will maltreat their children less. Additionally, we hypothesize perceptions of the community will moderate the relationship between involvement and maltreatment.

Participating in community events (community involvement) is closely related to a number of commonly studied concepts including social isolation, networks, and support. Prior research has found a connection between social isolation and child maltreatment (Belsky, 1993; Coohey, 1995, 1996; Gracia & Musitu, 2003; Hawthorne, 2008; Salzinger et al., 1983; Sidebotham et al., 2002). Parents who are socially isolated may be more likely to maltreat their children because they lack support systems that can help out in a time of need, they may have higher levels of depression and stress due to their isolation, and they have fewer adults around to ensure that they are parenting appropriately (Belsky, 1993; Fleming, Mullen,