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Youth self-report of physical and sexual abuse: A latent class analysis[☆]

Kate B. Nooner^a, Alan J. Litrownik^{b,*}, Richard Thompson^c, Benjamin Margolis^d,
Diana J. English^e, Elizabeth D. Knight^f, Mark D. Everson^g, Scott Roesch^b

^a Department of Psychology, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ, USA

^b Department of Psychology, San Diego State University and SDSU/UCSD Joint Doctoral Program in Clinical Psychology, San Diego, CA, USA

^c Juvenile Protective Association, Chicago, IL, USA

^d School of Public Health, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

^e School of Social Work, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

^f Department of Social Medicine, University of North Carolina School of Medicine, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

^g Department of Psychiatry, University of North Carolina School of Medicine, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To determine if meaningful groups of at-risk pre-adolescent youth could be identified based on their self-report of physical and sexual abuse histories.

Methods: Youth participating in a consortium of ongoing longitudinal studies were interviewed using an audio-computer assisted self-interview (A-CASI) when they were approximately 12 years of age to obtain information about their perceived experiences of physical (18 items) and sexual (12 items) abuse. In addition, Child Protective Service records were reviewed and the taxonomy developed for defining maltreatment characteristics (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993) was applied. A total of 795 youth completed the age 12 interview and had their records reviewed during the period from birth to the time of their age 12 interview. A latent variable modeling approach, specifically latent class analysis (LCA), was used to generate profiles of youth based on their endorsements of the physical and sexual abuse items. These profiles were then compared to CPS reports of physical or sexual abuse to determine their validity.

Results: The LCA identified 4 interpretable classes or groups of pre-adolescent youth. Based on the pattern of responses to specific items the classes were identified as follows: (1) no physical or sexual abuse; (2) high physical abuse/low sexual abuse; (3) no physical abuse/moderate sexual abuse; and (4) high physical and sexual abuse. Follow-up analyses indicated that the odds of a CPS report for Classes 2, 3, and 4 compared to Class 1 were significantly greater (2.21, 2.55, and 5.10, respectively).

Conclusion: The latent variable modeling approach allowed for the identification of meaningful groups of youth that accounted for both the occurrence of multiple types of abuse as well as differing severities associated with each type. It is suggested that this methodological approach may be most useful in future efforts to identify the antecedents and consequences of maltreatment.

Practice implications: The results of the present study not only have implications for future research efforts, but also suggest that in practice, youth at-risk for maltreatment may be reliable and valid reporters of their physical and sexual abuse experiences.

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* Corresponding author at: Child & Adolescent Services Research Center, 3020 Children's Way MC5033, San Diego, CA 92123, USA.

Introduction

Research consistently suggests that abuse and neglect in childhood derail normal development (Bolger & Patterson, 2001; Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; English et al., 2005; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). The experiences of abuse and neglect in childhood not only put youth at risk for immediate adverse outcomes such as poor school performance and increased psychological distress (Holt, Finkelhor, & Kantor, 2007) but may also lay the groundwork for longer-term deleterious health outcomes in adolescence and adulthood such as depression, anxiety, suicidality, and chronic pain (Anda et al., 2007; English et al., 2005; Sachs-Ericsson, Kendall-Tackett, & Hernandez, 2007; Salzinger, Rosario, Feldman, & Ng-Mak, 2007; Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007; Vranceanu, Hobfoll, & Johnson, 2007). Researchers have sought to address these issues by using various methodologies and study designs to better understand the ways in which youth are impacted immediately and over time by maltreatment experiences (Anda et al., 2007; Sachs-Ericsson et al., 2007; Vranceanu et al., 2007). However, questions remain regarding the processes by which maltreatment impairs development.

Vital to research on child maltreatment is information about the type, severity, and frequency of exposure to child abuse and neglect (English et al., 2005; Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001). However, much of the research on maltreatment has used operational definitions that entail very broad labels (i.e., occurrence versus non-occurrence of a single type of abuse) based on CPS designations of findings (i.e., substantiated versus unsubstantiated) to categorize victims. These methods are limited in that they often exclude important variations in youth's experiences of maltreatment that may account for later adversity (Litrownik et al., 2005). More specifically, the effect of an individual occurrence or type of maltreatment is less related to developmental outcomes than the cumulative impact of multiple occurrences and types of maltreatment throughout childhood (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Lau et al., 2005). This is particularly germane to child maltreatment research because complex, chronic, and multi-type maltreatment is the rule more often than the exception for maltreated youth (De Bellis, 2001; Litrownik et al., 2005; Saunders, 2003).

Even when the complexities associated with child maltreatment sequelae are recognized, the source of this information for identifying maltreatment has typically been reports of abuse that have been substantiated by CPS. However, there are many factors that contribute to the CPS designation of substantiation (i.e., a founded CPS allegation, which receives further investigation) or lack of substantiation (i.e., an unfounded CPS allegation, which does not receive further investigation) (Drake & Pandey, 1996; English, Marshall, Coghlan, Brummel, & Orme, 2002). Research comparing substantiated with unsubstantiated CPS reports suggests that youth whose cases are unsubstantiated may experience maltreatment that is just as severe as those that are substantiated. These investigations found that substantiated and unsubstantiated cases are more alike than different in terms of rate of perpetrator recidivism (Way, Chung, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2001), family risk factors for being re-reported to CPS (Wolock, Serman, Feldman, & Metzger, 2001), school and delinquency outcomes (Leiter, Myers, & Zingraff, 1994), and behavioral and emotional functioning (Hussey et al., 2005).

To more accurately gauge the frequency and heterogeneity of CPS reports, Barnett, Manly, and Cicchetti (1993) developed the Maltreatment Classification System (MCS) as a tool for researchers to systematically classify CPS reports of maltreatment according to type, severity, frequency, and chronicity. The MCS is a valuable tool because it allows researchers to use allegations of maltreatment made to CPS, rather than depending on CPS designations. However, relying on CPS allegations is also likely to produce an undercount of the actual incidence of child abuse and neglect in the general population (Sedlack & Broadhurst, 1996). Retrospective accounts (DiLillo, DeGue, Kras, & DiLoreto-Colgan, 2006), social worker ratings (McGee, Wolfe, Yuen, Wilson, & Carnochan, 1995), and interviews with caregivers (Stockhammer, Salzinger, Feldman, & Majica, 2001) represent important progress in building a multidimensional approach to examining maltreatment. Understandably, the sensitive and potentially traumatic nature of maltreatment has led some researchers to obtain more distal retrospective accounts from adults and adolescents rather than more proximal child accounts (Briere & Runtz, 1988; DiLillo et al., 2006; Powers, Eckenrode, & Jaklitsch, 1990; Rausch & Knutson, 1991; Stiffman, 1989). However, the results of these studies may still represent bias or inaccuracy, in that adult participants may have difficulty in accurately recalling maltreatment that occurred in childhood (Kolko, Brown, & Berliner, 2002; Widom, Raphael, & DuMont, 2004). In addition, much of what goes on in the family occurs behind closed doors; not only is this information not observable, but adults who participate may not be willing to disclose what happens. Therefore, child accounts of maltreatment are likely to reveal important information from a perspective that is unavailable from other sources.

In the maltreatment literature, youth self-reports of maltreatment have often been compared to other reporting sources as a means of evaluating their reliability as indicators of maltreatment. Overall, agreement of the youth with the CPS and parent report is highest for sexual abuse (>90% agreement) and lowest for neglect (60%), which may be related to the nature of sexual abuse versus that of neglect (McGee et al., 1995). Some studies also revealed that youth reports correlate reasonably well with CPS and parent report (Wekerle et al., 2001; Wingar & Lipshitz, 1999); while others have found poor agreement (Everson et al., 2008). When disagreement between reporting sources was found, youth usually failed to report abuse indicated by the other sources. Of note, youths' psychological adjustment was more strongly associated with their self-report of maltreatment than with CPS determinations (Everson et al., 2008).

In considering the concordance of youth reports with other reporting sources, it is important to keep in mind that agreement is influenced by a myriad of personal, legal and ethical considerations. In addition, individual informant heuristics, privileged knowledge, and relationship to the victim generate variation in the reported account of child maltreatment. For example, in a national survey, the majority of parents interviewed endorsed the use of corporal punishment in disciplining their children; however, only 1% endorsed physical discipline, which characterized children as having been "beat up" by

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