



The impact of repeated maltreatment on behavioral trajectories from early childhood to early adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Using multilevel model for change, this study examined the trajectories of both internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems from early childhood to early adolescence among a cohort of 685 children with early alleged maltreatment from age 4 through age 12. These children were recruited from five study sites using the LONGSCAN archive data. Repeated allegation of maltreatment for each child was treated as a time-varying variable and was tracked continuously and assessed at each measurement of the child behavioral problems. Child behavioral problems were measured at ages 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12 using the Child Behavior Checklist. Findings indicated that repeated maltreatment significantly predicted subsequent trajectories of both internalizing and externalizing problems. In both cases, the effect of repeated maltreatment was on the slope, rather than on the intercept which was reflected in the trajectories. Repeated maltreatment was associated with significantly steeper increases in both internalizing and externalizing problems over time. Although there were no differences in early behavioral assessments (e.g., age 4 and age 6), both internalizing and externalizing behaviors emerged later and became more pronounced over time among those with repeated maltreatment (e.g., since age 8) compared to those without. Although behavioral problems may not be seen in younger children who experience multiple maltreatment, it is prudent to be aware that the impact may likely emerge in later ages of the child. Thus, ongoing monitoring and assessment of treatment needs for children who have had multiple occurrence of maltreatment becomes imperative.

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1. Introduction

Child abuse and neglect remains a major problem in the U.S. In 2009, 3.6 million children were investigated by the child protective services (CPS) agencies across the nation, which equals to a rate of 48.1 per 1000 children in the population (Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, 2010). Also worth noting is that a high number of children re-enter the Child Protection System within two or three years after the initial incident of abuse (Éthier, Lemelin, & Lacharité, 2004; Lau et al., 2005; McGee, Wolfe, Yuen, Wilson, & Camachon, 1995). A study based on data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) estimated that within 24 months, 22% of children were rereported and 7% of those rereported were also substantiated (Fluke, Shusterman, Hollinshead, & Yuan, 2008). Drake, Jonson-Reid, and Sapokaite (2006) also reported a recurrence rate of 47% at the end of 36 months, and a recurrence rate of over 62% by 7.5 years after the initial referral.

Rereporting, also called reinvestigation, is defined as subsequent reports of maltreatment allegation that warrant an investigation or

assessment by CPS. Recurrence, also called revictimization, is often defined as any subsequent time that a child has been found to be a victim of maltreatment (Fluke et al., 2008) after the first incident. There is consistent evidence that exposure to repeated episodes of maltreatment, including both re-reporting and recurrence, is associated with increased risks of later behavior problems (Appleyard, Egeland, van Dulman, & Sroufe, 2005; Bolger & Patterson, 2001; Éthier et al., 2004; Graham et al., 2010; Manly, Cicchetti, & Barnett, 1994; Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001; Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001). Theoretically, repeated maltreatment experiences that persist across developmental stages lessen the child's possibilities for recovery or resilience, and are posited to have a high impact on behavioral problems (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Ireland, Smith, & Thornberry, 2002; Starr, MacLean, & Keating, 1991). However, studies that have examined the developmental trajectory of maltreatment have found that early maltreatment is a contributing factor that impacts later behavior problems (Thompson & Tabone, 2010). Thus, the discourse on whether repeated maltreatment would have more of an impact on later behavioral problems than early maltreatment would have had alone continues (Manly et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 2001; Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995). In addition, the issue of whether there are particular age periods when repeated maltreatment results in significant harm currently remains unresolved.

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2. Theoretical background

Two theories that purport to explain the relationship between maltreatment and later behavior problems are the developmental psychopathology perspective and the life course perspective. The former suggests that human development is hierarchical in nature and early adversities like maltreatment impede subsequent critical developmental tasks in later life (Cicchetti & Toth, 1995; Kotch et al., 2008; Manly et al., 1994; Toth, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1992). Studies favoring the developmental psychopathology perspective generally focus on relatively young children and have established a link between early maltreatment (e.g., that occurred in the first 5 years of life) and behavioral problems at later ages (Egeland, Yates, Appleyard, & van Dulmen, 2002; Fergusson & Lynskey, 1997; Horwitz, Widom, McLaughlin, & White, 2001; Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995). In contrast, the life course perspective emphasizes the possibilities of dynamic change over time during the course of human development. It highlights the potential influence of later events and experiences and suggests that there is a greater impact from maltreatment experiences which is more proximal to the outcome of interest (Appleyard et al., 2005; Elder, 1998; Ireland et al., 2002; Thornberry et al., 2001). Studies taking the life course perspective are mostly focused on youth and delinquency.

While both perspectives differ on the time of when the event is most impactful on the outcome, both perspectives agree that repeated maltreatment, or maltreatment chronicity has the greatest impact on later behavioral problems. The link between repeated maltreatment or maltreatment chronicity and later behavioral problems is well established in the literature (Appleyard et al., 2005; Bolger & Patterson, 2001; Éthier et al., 2004; Graham et al., 2010; Manly et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 2001). However, most studies, including longitudinal ones, usually examined behavioral problems at only one particular time point regardless of whether the onset is early or later (Horwitz et al., 2001; Johnson et al., 2002; Mersky & Reynolds, 2007; Thornberry et al., 2001). There is a dearth of studies on the effect of repeated maltreatment on the developmental course of behavioral problems. To better understand the relationship between repeated maltreatment and later behavioral problems, it is important to examine the trajectories of behavioral problems at different age points (Thompson & Tabone, 2010). Examining trajectories of behavioral problems will help to identify the particular age points when repeated maltreatment results in significant negative outcomes. Such findings will enable us to target our intervention on the specific age range associated with the greatest impact of repeated maltreatment on adverse behavioral outcomes.

3. Trajectory of behavioral problems

Among normative community residing children, although trajectories of internalizing problems were found to vary (Bongers, Koot, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2003; Colder Mott, and Berman, 2002; Keiley, Lofthouse, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 2003), the majority of children followed a stable trajectory which remained constant over time (Sterba, Prinstein, & Cox, 2007). On the other hand, externalizing problems like aggressive behaviors peaked relatively early in childhood (before age 4) and tended to decline over the course of later childhood (Bongers et al., 2003; Keiley et al., 2003; Owens & Shaw, 2003).

Maltreatment in early childhood has been found to be associated with the trajectories of both internalizing and externalizing problems (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Godinet, Li, & Berg, in press; Keiley, Howe, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2001; Proctor, Skriner, Roesch, & Litrownik, 2010; Thompson & Tabone, 2010; Van der Vegt et al., 2009). Studies examining behavioral problems during adolescence and early adulthood usually reported that children with early maltreatment had elevated levels of behavioral problems at initial assessment when compared to those without early maltreatment (Keiley et al., 2001; Van der Vegt et al., 2009). In contrast, one study which examined the effect of early maltreatment on behavioral problems in childhood reported no

significant difference between children with and without early alleged maltreatment in early behavioral assessments (e.g., at age 4). However, differences in anxiety/depression and attention problems were found to emerge and became more pronounced over time (Thompson & Tabone, 2010).

Relatively few studies have examined the effect of repeated maltreatment on the trajectories of behavioral problems. One of the reasons lies in the difficulty in defining as well as in operationalizing maltreatment chronicity. For example, Éthier et al. (2004) define maltreatment chronicity as the persistence of abuse and/or neglect over an extended period of time. This term was operationalized by either the length of time a case remains open in CPS (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993) or the total number of months that the family received services (Manly et al., 1994). Another definition that was referred to in the literature as either developmental (English, Graham, Litrownik, Everson, & Bangdiwala, 2005) or ordinal categories (OC) (Graham et al., 2010), where five ordinal categories were generated: situational, limited episodic, limited continuous, extended episodic and extended continuous. Although such a definition incorporates both the extent and continuity constructs of repeated maltreatment, it is operationally challenging. Additionally, it doesn't allow the assessment of children's maltreatment status and behavioral outcomes in tandem.

In our study, we attempted to address this issue from a different perspective. We treated repeated maltreatment as a time-varying predictor. In other words, the child's maltreatment status was continuously examined up to each age point when the child's behavioral problems were measured. In this way, we are able to examine whether repeated maltreatment is associated with the trajectories of child behavioral problems. If such is the case, we wanted to further explore whether the effect of repeated maltreatment varies over time or remains constant across childhood. Please refer to the Materials and methods section for a full description on how we define and operationalize this variable.

The purpose of this study is therefore built upon the extant literature that documents a link between repeated maltreatment and later behavioral problems. It is designed to explore the relationship between repeated maltreatment and trajectories of child behavior problems across childhood. The uniqueness of this study lies in the fact that it not only provides an alternative way of operationalizing repeated maltreatment, but also includes only children who had experienced maltreatment as early as age 4. In other words, all subjects included in this study must have at least one official CPS report by age 4, whether substantiated or not. Thus, the study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) Among the children with early childhood maltreatment, will repeated maltreatment be associated with elevated levels of behavior problems? (2) Will the effect of repeated maltreatment on child behavior vary over time? More specifically, we put forth the following directional hypotheses: (1) Repeated maltreatment will be associated with elevated intercepts of behavioral problems. That is children with repeated maltreatment at the first assessment (e.g., age 4) will have higher levels of behavioral problems when compared to those without repeated maltreatment; (2) Repeated maltreatment will be associated with steeper slopes of later behavioral problems. In other words, the difference in behavioral problems between those with repeated maltreatment and those without will drastically increase over time.

4. Material and methods

4.1. Study population

This study used the archived data of the Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN). LONGSCAN is a consortium of five ongoing prospective studies on the etiology and impact of child maltreatment, following a combined cohort of over 1300 abused children and their families until the children become 18 years old. Each of the five

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