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Reply

Situating maltreatment in the social context: Challenges for research



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ABSTRACT

This article is a reply to Kagan's (in press) commentary on our earlier article (Luke & Banerjee, 2013), which presented a meta-analysis and systematic review of research on the links between childhood maltreatment and social understanding. We address Kagan's comments about the depiction of maltreatment as an isolated independent variable, and consider the specific obstacles faced by researchers in this area when seeking to understand the role played by social-contextual factors. We also consider how Kagan's extension of our argument about heterogeneity in maltreated samples might usefully be applied to future research with this vulnerable group.

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Introduction

Kagan's commentary focuses on an important issue raised in our paper: namely, the difficulty inherent in attributing a developmental outcome to one aspect of children's experience. Here we briefly address Kagan's key comments in relation to the existing literature and make suggestions for ways in which they might be practically taken forward to inform future research with this vulnerable population.

Understanding the sequelae of maltreatment

The cornerstone of Kagan's argument is that maltreatment should not be treated as an isolated independent variable, used to predict outcomes throughout childhood and into adulthood. We broadly

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agree with the key point he raises about the need to examine *patterns of causes and outcomes*; we will argue below that this is indeed crucial for enriching our understanding of how maltreatment experiences fit into a complex interplay of biological, social, and psychological processes. However, it does not follow from the complexity of this interplay that synthesising evidence on the effects of maltreatment is not important. On the contrary, we believe that the links we presented in our meta-analysis and systematic review offer an important first step for those who are working to address the social and emotional problems faced by many maltreated children.

Besides the theoretical and empirical arguments presented in our paper, a wealth of neurophysiological evidence supports the argument that childhood maltreatment experiences might predict difficulties with social understanding. Belsky and de Haan (2011) outline the ways in which maltreatment can impact on the development of brain structures during a period of experience-dependent formation of synapses. Taking one example, Perry, Pollard, Blakley, Baker, and Vigilante (1995) have shown that early traumatic environments can lead to atypical neural activity, which causes problems with the organisation of the cortical-limbic areas involved in empathy, affect regulation, and attachment. In addition, reduced volume has been shown in the prefrontal cortex of maltreated children and adolescents with post-traumatic stress disorder (de Bellis et al., 2002), an area that has been consistently linked to ‘theory of mind’ (e.g., Spreng, Mar, & Kim, 2009). Maltreatment trauma can also affect the development of the right hemisphere, which has been implicated in the processing of socio-emotional information (Schore, 2001). Instead of helping infants to manage their physiological arousal, maltreating parenting induces atypical arousal: higher than average in the case of physical abuse, and lower than average for neglect (Schore, 2001). These atypical states of arousal last a long time, as parents do not provide any means of repair, and thereby alter the biochemistry of the developing brain. In this way, individual differences in children’s neurophysiological responses to social situations can be affected by negative parenting experiences.

Maltreated children: A heterogeneous population

Of course, not every maltreated child will develop in the same way, and this is where our argument converges with that of Kagan. Maltreated children do *not* represent a homogeneous population, as we have argued, and their strengths and difficulties are likely to reflect the influence of a combination of biological, personal, social and cultural factors. It is true that the meta-analytic section of our paper presented overall effects of maltreatment in relation to emotion knowledge (although even in this part of our work, we did examine some moderating factors), but we used the systematic review to move beyond this general picture of ‘problematic’ social understanding and discuss the more complex patterns of results uncovered in the literature. It is this very complexity that suggests an examination of the *interaction* of a variety of contributing factors could pay dividends, and indeed we have argued for this in our discussion.

Why then did we not present a more extensive examination of interaction effects in our review? This omission reflects a gap in the reporting of relevant variables in the maltreatment literature. Although our data extraction template included a field for interaction effects as well as main effects, very few of the studies in our review actually reported them. Our statistical moderator analyses reflect the broadest subdivisions reported in the literature; many papers did not report separate results for gender, ethnicity or socio-economic status, even where these demographic details were given. Not only this, but most did not report separate results for maltreatment subtypes, despite describing these basic differences in experience within their samples.

Moreover, Kagan claims that the general response of psychologists to individual and social characteristics is to control for their influence as confounding variables, rather than to examine the potential differences in their interactive influence when combined with particular subtypes of maltreatment, gender, ethnicity, etc. Yet, alongside the consideration of moderators in our meta-analysis, our systematic review did report on the influence of individual (IQ; e.g., Barahal, Waterman, & Martin, 1981) and contextual (‘early risk’; Tarullo, Bruce, & Gunnar, 2007) factors where these were available. The key limitation in the literature is that researchers have, by and large, not been able to achieve sufficient granularity in addressing the range of potential factors that might interact with – or form parts

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