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Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

Child abuse and neglect profiles and their psychosocial consequences in a large sample of incarcerated males

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ABSTRACT

Research examining child abuse and neglect (CAN) profiles among adult offender populations is lacking. Therefore, the primary aim of the present study was to address this limitation by using latent class analysis (LCA) to identify meaningful classes of individuals who have experienced physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, as well as neglect. Another aim was to estimate the association between CAN class membership and external criteria (psychopathy factors, self-esteem, attitudes towards male sexual violence in dating relationships, child sexual abuse myth acceptance, violent offending, and age). Data were collected among a large systematically selected sample of adult male inmates ($N = 1261$). Based on LCA, three unique classes of CAN were distinguished, including a 'low abuse' group (43.4% of the sample), a 'high physical and emotional abuse' group (51.3%), and a 'poly-victimised' group (5.3%). The analysis revealed that the CAN classes were differentially associated with affective responsiveness, cognitive responsiveness, personal self-esteem, prison self-esteem, attitudes towards male sexual violence in dating relationships, and violent offending. Findings highlight the unique nature of CAN constellations among criminal justice involved participants. The significance of the present results is discussed in relation to past and future research. Potential contributions to treatment strategies are also presented.

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1. Introduction

Child abuse and neglect (CAN) is a global phenomenon which constitutes a major public health issue (Shaw & De Jong, 2012). It has been reported that each year, one per cent of children in the population come into the attention of child protection services (Gilbert, Kemp et al., 2009). However, CAN is a crime which is likely to go underreported (Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005). Research indicates that per year between four and 16% of children experience physical abuse, 10% experience psychological abuse, between one and 15% are neglected, and six per cent experience sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1994; Gilbert, Widom et al., 2009; Mathews & Walsh, 2004).

The prevalence of CAN, however, appears to be increased for some types of samples, including offenders. Indeed, in one study, 90% of youth offenders reported having experienced at least one traumatic event (Ford, Chapman, Connor, & Cruise,

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2012). In a large UK cohort study with 3849 prisoners, 62% of respondents reported having experienced emotional abuse, 61% experienced physical abuse, and 31% experienced sexual abuse as a child (Williams, Papadopoulou, & Booth, 2012). Further, Weeks and Widom (1998) found that 68% of 301 adult male prisoners drawn from a New York State medium-security facility, experienced some kind of childhood victimization. Violent offenders were more likely to report neglect but not more physical abuse than their non-violent counterparts; whereas sex offenders reported childhood sexual abuse more often than individuals convicted of non-sexual offenses. Similarly, in two recent meta-analytic studies, the prevalence of child sex abuse was found to be higher among sex-offenders than non-sex offenders, but the two groups did not differ significantly with regard to physical abuse history (Jespersen, Lalumière, & Seto, 2009; Seto & Lalumière, 2010).

Child maltreatment is associated with serious internalizing and externalizing problems, including depression, self-destructive behavior, antisocial behavior, aggression, educational underachievement, and inappropriate sexual behaviors (Dhingra, Boduszek, & Sharratt, 2015; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, & Taylor, 2004; Jones, Trudinger, & Crawford, 2004; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; Lahey, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2003; Margolin and Gordis, 2000; Vachon, Krueger, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2015). Research also reports that youngsters who have experienced abuse have fewer friends and lower self-esteem than their non-abused counterparts (Al-Fayez, Ohaeri, & Gado, 2012; Oates, Forrest, & Peacock, 1985; Turner, Shattuck, Finkelhor, & Hamby, 2015). Additionally, being a victim to or witnessing violence increases the odds of offending, violent behavior, intimate partner violence, and arrest in adulthood (Brezina, 1998; Fagan, 2005; Forsman & Långström, 2012; Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Smith, Ireland, & Thornberry, 2005; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Williams et al., 2012). Thus, in line with the cycle of violence and social learning theories, it may be that violent behavior is acquired from observing and imitating aggressive adults (Bandura, 1978). Some other studies found a relationship between child maltreatment experiences and adult rape convictions and sexual aggression toward women (Dhawan & Marshall, 1996; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991). Along similar lines, Debowska, Boduszek, Dhingra, Kola-Palmer, and Meller-Prunska (2015) suggested that childhood exposure to violence is significantly associated with the acceptance of rape myths. In this study, however, an aggregate score for different types of experienced and witnessed violence was utilized, treating maltreatment as a unidimensional phenomenon.

Early exposure to violence may also disrupt psychological development and result in abnormal personality structures. To elaborate, Green et al.'s (2010) findings indicated that as much as 32.4% of all DSM-IV disorders could have been explained by childhood adversity. Several empirical studies have also suggested that exposure to violence may lead to increased total psychopathy ratings (Lang, Af Klinteberg, & Alm, 2002; Marshall & Cooke, 1999). Poythress, Skeem, and Lilienfeld (2006), using the Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (PCL-R; Hare, 1991, 2003) to measure psychopathy and structural equation modeling to analyze the data, found a significant direct effect of abuse on the erratic lifestyle dimension of psychopathy but not on the core interpersonal/affective traits. Despite the fact that the PCL-R consists of items pertaining to antisocial behavior, they were not included in the structural model. Of note, psychopathy is commonly conceptualized as a constellation of interpersonal, affective, lifestyle, and antisocial traits (Hare & Neumann, 2008); however, current research has indicated that criminality may be an outcome rather than an integral part of the condition and that egocentricity should be considered as a separate psychopathy dimension (see Boduszek & Debowska, 2016; Boduszek, Debowska, Dhingra, & DeLisi, 2016).

Although many studies have investigated psychosocial effects of child maltreatment, the strength of relationships reported could have been overestimated due to not controlling for the intercorrelations between different forms of CAN (Green et al., 2010; Scott, Varghese, & McGarh, 2010). This is an important limitation because recent work suggests that various forms of violence tend to co-occur (Green et al., 2010; Hamby & Grych, 2013) and interact “in a manner that is more detrimental to development than the influence of one type alone” (Wolfe & McGee, 1994, p. 168). Further, poly-victimization is deemed as particularly harmful (Turner, Shattuck, Finkelhor, & Hamby, 2016). As such, using traditional variable-centered statistical approaches, which focus on associations between study variables, appears redundant in this context. A more reliable information concerning the patterns of concomitance and effects of CAN types may be obtained using person-oriented techniques, such as latent class (LCA) and latent profile analysis (LPA), which examine the ways in which numerous characteristics are configured within individuals (De Fruyt & De Clercq, 2014).

Indeed, mixture modeling has been previously employed in child abuse research; providing information in regard to abuse intensity (quantitative differences) and variations of co-occurrence of abuse types (qualitative differences). For example, Noonan et al. (2010) identified four meaningful classes of physical and sexual abuse among 795 pre-adolescent youths; including no physical/sexual abuse (85.1% of respondents), high physical and low sexual abuse (6.2%), no physical abuse and moderate sexual abuse (5.8%), as well as high physical/sexual abuse (2.9%) groups. Armour, Elklit, and Christoffersen (2014) investigated a broader spectrum of abuse forms, incorporating physical abuse, psychological maltreatment, neglect, and sexual abuse. Their sample consisted of a stratified random sample of 2980 Danes (all aged 24 years). The LCA resulted in four latent typologies: psychologically maltreated class (9.7%), sexually abused class (2%), abused overall class (2.1%), and non-abused class (86.2%). Yet another LPA among 117 preschool children (3–6 years old) entering foster care placements, retrieved four latent profiles of physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological maltreatment, supervisory neglect, and physical neglect. The greatest risk of both externalizing and internalizing problems was reported for children in the sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychological maltreatment, and neglect group; whereas the lowest risk of such problems was found for children classified in the supervisory neglect and emotional maltreatment group (Pears, Kim, & Fisher, 2008).

Studies utilizing exclusively male samples are rare in child abuse research. Given the differing abuse incidence reported for males and females (World Health Organization [WHO], 2016), however, it appears that profiling studies should focus on the two genders separately. Using a sample of 626 urban community men (*M* age = 24.6 years), Davis et al. (2015) identified four

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