



The enduring effect of maltreatment on antisocial behavior: A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies



Teresa Braga^{a,*}, Olga Cunha^{b,c,d,1}, Ângela Maia^{a,2}

^a Psychology Research Centre, School of Psychology, University of Minho, Portugal

^b North Lusitana University (Porto), Portugal

^c Psychology Research Centre for Development (CIPD) Portugal

^d Center of Juridical-Economic and Environmental Studies (CEJEA) Portugal

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Maltreatment
Adult antisocial behavior
Meta-analysis

ABSTRACT

The maltreatment-antisocial behavior relationship has been a focus of research for decades. Nevertheless, understanding this association has been largely based on cross-sectional designs and on juvenile antisocial outcomes. The present meta-analysis aimed to extend previous work on the maltreatment-antisocial relation by focusing on prospective longitudinal studies that have followed-up participants into adulthood. General, maltreatment and abusive intimate partner violent behaviors were included as outcomes. A total of 14 studies including 18 independent samples and 20,946 individuals were considered. Our results revealed that maltreated youth are nearly two times as likely to engage in antisocial behaviors in adulthood compared with their non-maltreated peers ($OR = 1.96$; $CI[1.42, 2.71]$). The relation between maltreatment and antisocial behavior was stronger when less covariates or the bivariate associations between them were considered, and maltreatment assessed in both childhood and adolescent years was more strongly related to the antisocial outcome. Nevertheless, the maltreatment-antisocial behavior link prevailed in the contrasting conditions, i.e., maltreatment assessed in childhood or in adolescent years, in multivariate analyses. Our results support an enduring effect of maltreatment on subsequent involvement in antisocial behavior, stressing the importance of preventing this victimization experience or, at best, the adverse consequences of maltreatment.

1. Introduction

Maltreatment affects millions of children around the world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) at least one in every four individuals report experiences of physical abuse as children, and at least one in five women and one in every 20 men report having been sexually abused as a child (WHO & ISPCAN, 2006). Moreover, maltreatment is a risk factor for several health-compromising outcomes (e.g., Norman et al., 2012; Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007; Thornberry, Henry, Ireland, & Smith, 2010; Wilson & Widom, 2008), including juvenile delinquency and adult crime (e.g., Mersky & Reynolds, 2007; Smith, Ireland, & Thornberry, 2005). Even so, knowledge on this relationship is largely based on individual empirical studies, often with methodologically weak designs and conducted among incarcerated delinquents (Thornberry, Knight, & Lovegrove, 2012; Widom, 2017). A meta-

analysis of the relationship between childhood violence exposure (including direct victimization) and juvenile antisocial behavior showed that the majority of the studies were cross-sectional and relied on retrospectively reported experiences of maltreatment; these studies yield stronger associations between maltreatment and antisocial behavior compared to those found in the scarce longitudinal studies identified (Wilson, Stover, & Berkowitz, 2009).

Since the 1980s and 1990s, prospective and longitudinal studies overcoming many of the limitations of earlier work have emerged, and have generally supported the hypothesis of the cycle of violence, i.e., the notion that maltreated children are at an increased risk of perpetrating antisocial behavior later in life (e.g., Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Ogloff, Cutajar, Mann, & Mullen, 2012; Smith et al., 2005; Topitzes, Mersky, & Reynolds, 2012; Widom, 1989). Prospective and longitudinal designs offer numerous benefits, such as collecting data prospectively and prior to the knowledge of a possible subsequent event, establishing a temporal sequence of events, inferring

* Corresponding author at: Escola de Psicologia, Universidade do Minho, Campus de Gualtar, 4710-057 Braga, Portugal.

E-mail addresses: teresa.g.braga@gmail.com (T. Braga), olgacunha@por.ulusiada.pt (O. Cunha), angelam@psi.uminho.pt (Â. Maia).

¹ Postal address: Rua Dr. Lopo de Carvalho, 4369-006 Porto.

² Postal address: Escola de Psicologia, Universidade do Minho, Campus de Gualtar, 4710-057 Braga, Portugal.

causal effects, identifying the prevalence and frequency of events at each age, assessing stability and changes over time in particular individuals and in phenomena (within and between individual variations), providing information about cumulative phenomena, and limiting the recall bias from participants (Caruana, Roman, Hernández-Sánchez, & Solli, 2015; Farrington, 1991; Malvaso, Delfabbro, & Day, 2018). However, longitudinal studies also have disadvantages, such as the test effect related to repeated measurements, participant's attrition, difficulties in separating the reciprocal impact of exposure and outcome and in distinguishing period effects and aging effects (e.g., Caruana et al., 2015; Rajulton, 2001). Furthermore, not all longitudinal studies establish the sequence of events to the same extent due to their shorter or longer follow-up periods. For instance, not assessing maltreatment in younger ages results in a shorter exposure time that may underestimate the prevalence of maltreatment (Thornberry et al., 2012), and consequently underestimate the link between maltreatment and antisocial behavior. Additionally, studies that control for initial antisocial behavior (or a proxy such as externalization) provide a clearer examination of the effect of maltreatment on antisocial outcomes as they preclude the results are not due to initial individual differences.

Despite the potential advantages of longitudinal designs, the majority of previous meta-analytic reviews of the relation between maltreatment and antisocial behavior have not focused specifically on these studies, and those who have, only examined the effect of maltreatment on antisocial behaviors until juvenile years (Braga, Gonçalves, Basto-Pereira, & Maia, 2017). Indeed, less longitudinal studies have extended the antisocial outcome to adulthood. A systematic review on prospective and longitudinal studies of the maltreatment–offending association showed that only eight of the 62 included studies followed outcomes in adulthood (Malvaso et al., 2018). It is important to analyze the enduring effect of maltreatment since research has shown that individuals who were victimized as children report more stressful life events over their lifetime (Horwitz, Widom, McLaughlin, & White, 2001). Additionally, some authors have called attention to potential “sleeper effects” in response to abuse and neglect, as the lack of a more immediate effect may become significant later in life (Widom, 2017). Furthermore, meta-analytic reviews of the relation between maltreatment and adult antisocial behavior tend to focused on specific outcomes, such as intimate partner violence (IPV; Stith et al., 2000), sexual abuse (Jespersen, Lalumière, & Seto, 2009; Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001) or maltreatment (Thornberry et al., 2012). The present meta-analysis aimed to extend previous work on the relation between maltreatment and antisocial in general, focusing on prospective longitudinal studies that have followed-up participants into adulthood.

Several theories have been developed to explain the link between maltreatment and antisocial behavior. Social learning theories (e.g., Bandura, 1977; Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990) showed that through an intergenerational process children learn how to behave both by experiencing how others treat them and by observing how their parents treat each other. Children who experience or observe violence at home may learn that the use of violence is an acceptable way to solve conflicts, and are more likely to imitate or tolerate these behaviors than those children from nonviolent homes (Stith et al., 2000). These theories assume that violence is a learned behavior that is then repeated in adult relationships. The modeling process that these theories appeal to, make them particularly important in explaining the association between child maltreatment and perpetrating maltreatment and/or IPV as an adult. Nonetheless, research has highlighted a relation between suffering from maltreatment and involvement in antisocial acts in general (e.g., Abajobir et al., 2017; Bartlett, Raskin, Kotake, Nearing, & Easterbrooks, 2014; Cutajar, Ogloff, & Mullen, 2011; English, Widom, & Brandford, 2002; Lee et al., 2012). General strain theory (Agnew, 1992) posits that being born in maltreating environments is a source of strain for youths, by emphasizing the emotional impact of maltreatment on children. Maltreated children may develop negative emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, shame) and, as a consequence, a low ability to

regulate emotions, that drive them to engage in antisocial acts when the surrounding context allows (Agnew, 2001). Thus, delinquent behavior is a result of an adolescent's inability to cope with, or even to escape from, an adverse environment, such as child abuse and neglect (Agnew, 1992).

An increasing body of research has adopted a developmental psychopathology perspective in understanding child maltreatment and its consequences (e.g., Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Cicchetti & Valentino, 2006; Toth & Cicchetti, 2013). The essence of developmental psychopathology is its focus on both normal and abnormal developmental processes. On one hand, secure relationship attachment provides the essential safety for the individual to acquire developmental abilities (e.g., ego resilience, self-control, emotion regulation, interpersonal problem-solving), protecting them against the involvement in antisocial behavior. On the other hand, abuse deprives children of the average expectable environment crucial to adaptive development, leaving children more vulnerable to the interpersonal, cognitive, emotional, and biological factors that contribute to antisocial behavior (Cicchetti & Valentino, 2006; Toth & Cicchetti, 2013). The developmental psychopathology perspective claims that risk factors interact in a complex way (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005). For instance, the dysregulated behavior and/or affect that results from maltreatment may provoke further negative reactions from others and lead to youths' withdrawal from prosocial contexts, further interfering with the development of personal skills. According to this perspective, child maltreatment may also affect biological processes that, in interaction with environmental, social, and intrapersonal factors, contribute to the development of antisocial behavior, (Cicchetti & Toth, 2005; Toth & Cicchetti, 2013). A recent review of the neurobiological effects of child maltreatment has showed that this adverse experience affects different brain regions believed to play important roles in learning, decision making, and emotional response and regulation (Teicher & Samson, 2016).

Although research has lead support to the link between maltreatment and adult antisocial behavior, some inconsistent results have emerged. Literature has revealed that child maltreatment may have differential effects according to individuals' socio-demographic characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity or age of exposure. Specifically, different studies have suggested that being maltreated largely increases the risk of involvement in violence among females (e.g., Coleman, Kim, Mitchell-Herzfeld, & Shady, 2009; Maxfield & Widom, 1996; Trickett, Noll, & Putnam, 2011). Research has also revealed a higher prevalence of childhood maltreatment among blacks compared to whites and ethnic differences in maltreatments' potential outcomes, with black minority ethnicities being more likely to engage in serious violence (Sedlak et al., 2010; Sedlak, McPherson, & Das, 2010). As for age of exposure, results point to a stronger relation between adolescent (versus childhood) maltreatment and antisocial outcomes (Smith et al., 2005; Smith, Ireland, Park, Elwyn, & Thornberry, 2011; Thornberry et al., 2010). The proximity of the events (Sampson & Laub, 2005), and the stage salient issues of adolescence (Cicchetti, 2006) have been proposed to explain this result. Furthermore, suffering from maltreatment in both childhood and adolescence emerged as a robust predictor of subsequent antisocial behavior, pointing to a dose-response effect (Ireland, Smith, & Thornberry, 2002; Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001). Nonetheless, Mersky, Topitzes, and Reynolds (2012) noted that maltreatment experienced only in childhood may have a greater importance for adult versus juvenile antisocial.

The source through which maltreatment and antisocial behaviors are measured – official records or self-report questionnaires – may also affect the link between these variables. Official maltreatment predicted several antisocial outcomes (arrest, general offending, and violence) while self-reported measures of maltreatment was only related to self-reported general offending (Smith, Ireland, Thornberry, & Elwyn, 2008). On the other hand, Lansford et al. (2007) found that maltreated children were more likely to present officially registered crimes as juveniles but they were not more likely to self-report crime. These results

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