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Research article

The impact of patterns of trauma exposure among low income children with and without histories of child maltreatment

Abigail L. Rosen^{a,*}, Elizabeth D. Handley^a, Dante Cicchetti^{a,b}, Fred A. Rogosch^{a,*}^a Mt. Hope Family Center, University of Rochester, United States^b Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, United States

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has revealed a large prevalence of trauma experienced by children, creating high risk for the development of psychopathology. Research investigating the negative impacts of child maltreatment and other traumas has typically examined these experiences individually, controlling for co-occurring traumas, or has combined these experiences into a general variable of risk, thereby obscuring the complex relationships among environmental traumas and maltreatment. The current study expands on previous research by elucidating relationships between multiple contexts of overlapping traumas and maltreatment experienced by children, and by categorizing how these experiences join together to impact internalizing and externalizing symptomatology. Participants included 316 maltreated children and 269 nonmaltreated children (M age = 9.4, SD = 0.88) who attended a summer day camp research program for low-income children. Latent Class Analysis (LCA) identified three differential patterns of trauma exposure across children: 1) community violence and loss; 2) pervasive trauma; and 3) low trauma. Covariate analyses demonstrated that child maltreatment was significantly associated with class membership, suggesting that maltreated children were more likely to experience diverse traumas extending beyond their maltreatment experiences (pervasive trauma class). A two-way analysis of variance also demonstrated that trauma latent class membership and child maltreatment each represented unique predictors of internalizing and externalizing symptoms, with each having an independent effect on symptomatology. This investigation provides unique insight into the differential impact of patterns of trauma exposure and child maltreatment, providing support for further research and clinical practice addressing multiple levels of a child's ecology.

1. Introduction

Research on the prevalence of childhood trauma has revealed an enormous presence of violence and chronic stress occurring during childhood, reaching epidemic proportions (Lanius, Vermetten, & Pain, 2010). Specifically, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) defines trauma as an experience that “threatens the life or physical integrity of a child or someone important to that child,” frequently resulting in feelings of terror or hopelessness that overwhelm a child's capacity to cope (National Children's Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), 2017). Large-scale national surveys of children have demonstrated an extreme number of children who have directly experienced or witnessed such events, including physical or sexual assault, shootings, stabbings, child abuse and neglect, as well as various other forms of family and community violence (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015; Finkelhor, Vanderminden, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2016). Growing up in a dangerous or threatening environment has been

* Corresponding authors at: Mt. Hope Family Center, 187 Edinburgh Street, Rochester, NY 14608, United States.

E-mail addresses: Abigail.Rosen@rochester.edu (A.L. Rosen), Fred.Rogosch@URMC.Rochester.edu (F.A. Rogosch).

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associated with numerous adverse consequences, creating significant developmental hurdles in children across both biological and psychological domains of development (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2016). Experiencing trauma during childhood can lead to impairments in cognitive functioning, personality, internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and disruptions in biochemical stress response systems (Cicchetti & Toth, 2015; McEwen & Wingfield, 2010; Pfefferbaum, 1997). Children exposed to various forms of trauma are also at heightened risk for psychopathology lasting throughout adulthood (Cicchetti & Toth, 2015; Schoedl et al., 2010), highlighting the lasting effects of exposure to trauma early in life.

Although there is a multitude of research published on the impact and prevalence of both trauma exposure/poly-victimization and maltreatment specifically, most of this work has either investigated these two concepts individually, or has combined these experiences into a general variable of risk, obscuring the complicated relationships between maltreatment and broader environmental traumas (Felitti et al., 1998; Turner & Butler, 2003). As a result, very little research has evaluated the interconnections between child maltreatment and other forms of trauma. In one example of research examining variation in the associations of various childhood adversities with PTSD, McLaughlin et al. (2017) analyzed data from a large, nationwide sample collected by World Mental Health Surveys. Results indicated that physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and parent psychopathology all predicted similar odds of developing PTSD, whereas interpersonal loss, parental maladjustment, serious physical illness, and economic adversity did not predict PTSD. Such findings highlight the importance of considering the type of traumas associated with heightened PTSD vulnerability. However, it is unlikely that such types of trauma occur independently, and research on polyvictimization has demonstrated that the majority of children impacted by trauma or maltreatment experience multiple forms of violence, abuse, or neglect that overlap with each other (Adams et al., 2016; Vachon, Krueger, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2015). As a result, examining the unique effects of forms of trauma may not represent the true experiences of children who are exposed to many different forms of trauma and maltreatment. Consequently, more research examining the patterns and interactions among various experiences is necessary to provide a more accurate and realistic portrayal of children's overlapping exposures to trauma and/or maltreatment.

Cicchetti and Lynch (1993) introduced an ecological-transactional perspective to study the integration of community violence and maltreatment experiences, through which we can evaluate the ways that multiple levels of a child's ecology influence and interact with each other in shaping developmental trajectories. This perspective highlights the complexity inherent in children's environments, as each contextual level is thought to exert influence on both the individual child and on events in the surrounding levels of ecology (Lynch & Cicchetti, 2002; Cicchetti & Valentino, 2018; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Polo-Tomas, & Taylor, 2007; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998). Consequently, ecological-transactional models propose that in order to assess context comprehensively, researchers must investigate elements from each level of the ecology. Lynch and Cicchetti (1998) further developed this ecological-transactional approach to examining the mutual relationships among community violence and child maltreatment in a 1998 manuscript, in which the authors found that children with higher levels of violence in their community were more likely to be physically abused and experience severe neglect. Interestingly, the authors also found bidirectional relationships between exposure to community violence and maltreatment over a 1-year period, drawing attention to the interplay occurring between these levels of environmental violence. These results are consistent with more recent literature that indicates a positive correlation between environmental violence/stress and child maltreatment, suggesting that these experiences are typically overlapping in children (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007; Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Balties, 2009; Stith et al., 2009).

Although we know that the layers of violence and trauma experienced by children are often correlated, more work is needed to explore the transactional and interactional effects of these ecological levels. Cicchetti and Lynch (1993) proposed that community violence may serve to moderate the relationship between child maltreatment and adolescent mental health outcomes, though there is little known about the interaction of these contexts to support this. Uhrlass and Gibb (2007) evaluated interaction effects and found that stressful life events mediated, but not moderated, the effects of childhood emotional maltreatment. Similarly, Manly, Oshri, Lynch, Herzog, and Wortel (2013) found that the relationship of child neglect and children's externalizing symptoms was mediated by neighborhood crime rates. Maughan and Cicchetti (2002) also found no significant interaction effects of interadult violence and maltreatment status on childhood behavior problems, suggesting instead an indirect relationship between interadult violence and children's behavior that is likely explained through the effects of child maltreatment. Lynch and Cicchetti (1998) found that maltreated children from high-violence communities consistently demonstrated higher internalizing/externalizing symptoms than nonmaltreated children from low-violence communities, suggesting a purely additive rather than interactive effect of child maltreatment and community violence on child functioning. Alternatively, trauma exposure might have more prominent impact on individuals without a history of child maltreatment, possibly because they have limited experience with highly stressful or dangerous environments and therefore may be more sensitive to such events. Trauma experiences may also lead to negative outcomes regardless of maltreatment history. Research has found support for child maltreatment moderating the effects of environmental stress on depression, suggesting that the risk of a child developing depressive symptoms is much higher after experiencing environmental or relational stressors among maltreated children (Harkness, Bruce, & Lumley, 2006). Overall, our understanding surrounding the interactions between child maltreatment and environmental trauma remains limited and often conflicting.

An important method for investigating such nuanced relationships between multifaceted, overlapping experiences of trauma involves person-centered approaches, such as Latent Class Analysis or Latent Profile Analysis. Person-centered methods provide awareness into the natural clustering of experiences across individuals, allowing us to better understand the complex systems of trauma across a sample and identify meaningful subgroups of individuals within a sample (Bergman, von Eye, & Magnusson, 2006). These techniques also enable researchers to take into account multi-systemic influences by integrating information from multiple informants across several domains and contexts, as utilized in this paper. Because trauma experienced by children can occur in varying, intersecting levels of their ecology, person-centered methods may be a critical tool in elucidating the relationships between maltreatment and trauma experiences, and categorizing how those experiences join together to impact mental health outcomes.

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