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Profiles and behavioral consequences of child abuse among adolescent girls and boys from Barbados and Grenada

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ABSTRACT

The current study used latent class analysis to uncover groups of youths with specific abuse (physical, emotional, and sexual) profiles in and outside the family, and identify how membership in each abuse group is associated with behavioral outcomes. Data were collected among a sample of male ($n = 662$; $M_{\text{age}} = 13.02$ years) and female ($n = 689$; $M_{\text{age}} = 12.95$ years) children and adolescents (9–17 years old) from Barbados and Grenada. Self-report surveys were completed by participants in school settings. Three latent classes of child abuse were distinguished among boys, including ‘low abuse’ (39.2% of the sample), ‘physical and emotional abuse high outside/medium in the family’ (43.2%), and ‘high overall abuse’ (17.6%). Among girls, four unique classes were recovered: ‘low abuse’ (40.7%), ‘high physical and emotional abuse outside the family’ (7.6%), ‘high emotional and moderate physical abuse’ (33.9%), and ‘high overall abuse’ (17.8%). Compared with members of low abuse groups, youths who reported having experienced high/moderate levels of various forms of violence, including those who were abused in multiple ways and across the two settings (‘high overall abuse’), were significantly more likely to engage in violent and hostile behavior. Abused and non-abused youths did not differ on non-violent conflict resolution skills. The significance of present findings for future research and practice is discussed.

1. Introduction

1.1. Child abuse in Barbados and Grenada

Although research interest in the scope and consequences of child abuse has significantly increased in the past three decades, most epidemiological studies conducted to date utilized North American and Western European samples, whereas the majority of prevention studies were based in North America (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008; WHO, 2006). This is problematic because, in line with the ecological model of violence, the extent, causes, and correlates of child maltreatment appear to be population specific. Indeed, cultural values, beliefs, practices, and social structures, which in Cicchetti and Lynch’s (1993) ecological/transactional model of community violence and child maltreatment are represented as the macro- and exosystem, can have the effect of condoning certain expressions of violence. This, in turn, provides a framework through which people act and justify their actions as morally right

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(Wood, 2007). Controversially, Cultural explanations for violence against women and children tend predominantly to be discussed in relation to non-Western contexts. Nevertheless, it is the case that violence is not only widespread in some Caribbean countries, but that it is also reinforced through the various manifestations of culture (Imbusch, 2011; Krug et al., 2002), to the extent that its reduction has been presented as an urgent challenge (UNICEF, 2006). Despite its low visibility, domestic violence, including child maltreatment (CM), seems to be the most prevalent type of violence in the region (Imbusch, 2011). Considered from a wide socio-historical perspective, family violence among contemporary Caribbean societies appears to be a function of the oppressive and patriarchal culture, gender inequality, violent history of the colonization process, slavery, as well as insufficient political and legal frameworks which would guard against such violence (Jeremiah, Quinn, & Alexis, 2017; Jones, Trotman Jemmott, Maharaj, & Da Breo, 2014).

Barbados and Grenada are English-speaking nations located in the Eastern Caribbean region. According to data extracted from the Child Care Board, 3519 cases of child abuse involving 4868 children were reported in Barbados in 2008–2013. The most common form of maltreatment was neglect ($n = 1471$ cases; 41.8%), followed by physical abuse ($n = 861$; 24.5%). As for sexual abuse, there were 836 cases recorded (23.8% of all cases), with the majority (86.5%) of perpetrators being known to the victim. A total of 342 (10%) cases were those involving emotional abuse. Of the total number of reported cases, 57.6% ($n = 2803$) involved female victims. The disparity between the two sexes was especially high for sexual abuse, with 88.6% ($n = 782$) of victims being female (UNICEF, 2015a). It must be noted here, however, that male survivors are less likely to report experiences of sexual abuse than their female counterparts, which may be due to the perceived loss of masculinity associated with this form of victimization (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Johnson et al., 2006). In Grenada, official data on child abuse are collated by the Child Protection Authority. During the period 2009–2013, there were 1503 reported cases of child victimization, with physical abuse being the most prevalent type of maltreatment ($n = 524$; 34.9%), followed closely by neglect ($n = 497$; 33.1%) and sexual abuse ($n = 438$; 29.1%) (UNICEF, 2015b). When the above incidence rates are converted into period prevalence, it seems that in 2008–2013 approximately 1–2% of children and adolescents in Barbados and Grenada experienced abuse.

Notwithstanding the importance of those official reports, survey studies demonstrate a much higher proportion of children with a history of maltreatment than officially recorded by child protection services (CPS) (Gilbert et al., 2009). Although such research is sparse in the Eastern Caribbean, some studies have attempted to fill this critical knowledge gap. For instance, James et al. (2016), in a study among 1227 young adults in Barbados, Grenada, and Jamaica, revealed that 13.4% of females and 8.7% of males have experienced either physical or sexual abuse in childhood. These results, however, should be tempered by the fact that prevalence of physical and/or sexual abuse was reported as a single value. In a qualitative study into perceptions and attitudes to child sexual abuse in the Eastern Caribbean, it was demonstrated that although girls are more vulnerable victims than boys, abuse of boys, including sexual abuse, is a significant problem (Jones & Trotman Jemmott, 2009). Male victims in the region are unlikely to divulge abuse, which may be due to social ostracism that such a disclosure may entail, as well as the fear of being branded homosexual (Jones & Trotman Jemmott, 2009; UNICEF, 2013). Of note, high abuse rates among boys were also reported in studies conducted in other non-Western societies, including India (Charak & Koot, 2014) and Malaysia (Choo, Dunne, Marret, Fleming, & Wong, 2011). This suggests that study findings conducted in the West are not reflective of the situation of children embedded in different cultural contexts and that more research with non-Western populations across geographical locations is needed to obtain a clearer picture of abuse rates and patterns worldwide. Finally, although a recent WHO (2014) study revealed that 36% of adults worldwide were emotionally abused in childhood and emotional abuse has been recognized as an important risk to health (see Norman et al., 2012 for a systematic review and meta-analysis), studies examining the rates and consequences of this form of ill-treatment in Barbadian and Grenadian context are missing.

1.2. Youth violence as a function of child abuse

Youth violence is of great concern in Barbados and Grenada. In a report on juveniles in Barbados, the National Task Force on Crime Prevention (2010) indicated that 21% of primary school and 43% of secondary school children used force to obtain what they wanted from someone at school. Additionally, 50% of primary school and 64% of secondary school students admitted to having been in a fist fight at school. As for more serious offenses, 5% of primary school and 18% of secondary school children admitted to taking a weapon (other than a gun) to school with an intention to harm someone. Finally, 10% of primary school and 19% of secondary school students reported that they were a member of a gang. Key offenses for arrest among Barbadian and Grenadian juveniles included assault, wounding, and serious bodily harm (UNICEF, 2015a, 2015b).

In line with the cycle of violence hypothesis, youth violence may be a consequence of direct victimization experiences (Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, & Taylor, 2004; Lahey, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2003; Margolin & Gordis, 2000). Indeed, in one study, a history of childhood abuse among mothers was found to be predictive of the use of physical and verbal punishment toward own children (Ferrari, 2002), suggesting that abused children may grow to perceive violence as a viable conflict resolution strategy. Of the rare studies into the effect of domestic violence on Barbadian children, Marshall-Harris (2011) found that of the 274 juveniles brought before the District A Juvenile Court during February 2006 and July 2010, 79 were documented to come from violent families. Of the 79 youths, 19 were charged with violent crimes (such as assault and wounding), providing evidence for the cyclical pattern of abusive behavior. In another study, Barbadian children raised in violent families were noted for frequently fighting at school, as well as being withdrawn and aggressive (CADRES, 2009). Although youth violence and crime has been noted as a serious problem in Caribbean countries (World Bank, 2003), the association between child maltreatment and violence perpetration remains underexplored in Barbados and Grenada. This in turn impedes the development of effective, population-specific preventive and treatment strategies, which may have a harmful effect on the region's economic and social development.

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