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Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

Severity of maltreatment and personality pathology in adolescents of Jammu, India: A latent class approach

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ABSTRACT

The aims of the present study were to identify discrete classes of adolescents based on their reporting of emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect of several levels of severity using a person-centered analytic approach (i.e., latent class analysis), and to compare the latent classes on 17 dimensions of personality pathology. It was hypothesized that based on types of maltreatment and severity levels within each type there would be discrete latent classes, and that classes of adolescents exposed to a larger number of maltreatment types with higher severity (i.e., moderate–severe) would report higher levels of personality pathology than adolescents in classes exposed to less types with less severity, after controlling for age and gender. Participants were 702 adolescents from Jammu, India (13–17 years, 41.5% females). The latent classes were based on three levels of severity for each type of maltreatment assessed via the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein et al., 2003). Four distinct classes of adolescents, namely, *Moderate–severe abuse and physical neglect* (Class 1), *Low to moderate–severe abuse* (Class 2), *Moderate–severe neglect* (Class 3), and *Minimal abuse or neglect* (Class 4) were found. Classes with higher percentages of adolescents reporting abuse and neglect with higher severity (Classes 1 and 2) reported higher levels of personality pathology than the other classes. There are distinct classes of adolescents' identifiable based on levels of severity and types of abuse and neglect, which are differentially associated with specific dimensions of personality pathology. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

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Introduction

It is well documented that abuse and neglect among children and adolescents is associated with detrimental outcomes, including, impairment in cognitive, affective, and psychosocial performance (Bolger & Patterson, 2001; Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Rogosch, Oshri, & Cicchetti, 2010). However, most of the research based evidence on child abuse and neglect comes from developed nations, whereas a large proportion of the world's children reside in developing countries such as India. In recent times, recommendations from academia, researchers, and organizations (e.g., International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect [ISPCAN]) have been made to address this gap in research (Pinheiro, 2006). Doing so would facilitate a more precise estimation of the prevalence of abuse and neglect among children and adolescents across the globe, and help in understanding its negative impact on mental health. Such knowledge in turn would aid interventions and policy formulation directed toward the well-being of children and adolescents.

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Child Abuse and Neglect in India: Problems and Challenges

India is home to 19% of the world's population under the age of 18 years among which 40% are in need of care and protection. The latter proportion comprises children in adverse circumstances, including, victims of child maltreatment, child labor and trafficking, and those suffering from malnutrition and infectious diseases, as highlighted in the Child Abuse Report by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India (MWCD; Kacker, Varadan, & Kumar, 2007). The report further highlights the high rates of abuse and neglect in children and adolescents as obtained in a national survey using focus group discussion with children and interviews with adults and organizations. According to the survey report, 69% of children/adolescents reported physical abuse, 53% reported sexual abuse, and nearly 49% reported emotional abuse (Kacker et al., 2007). In addition, nearly 71% of the girls reported to have faced neglect within the family. Other studies conducted in India, including the ISPCAN survey using parent-report indicated the use of harsh physical disciplining methods by 29% of the parents (Runyan et al., 2010). In the self-report measure of the ISPCAN survey, 70% of the children reported physical punishment and 35% reported experiencing neglect (Zolotor et al., 2009). Still others report that 18–21% of adolescents face psychological or sexual violence in India (Deb & Modak, 2010), and nearly 62% of children on the streets face moderately severe levels of overall abuse (Mathur, Rathore, & Mathur, 2009). Taken together, these studies give an impression of the high rates of abuse and neglect in children and adolescents in India. However, the studies are limited in several ways.

First, none of the studies based exclusively on Indian samples (e.g., Deb & Modak, 2010; Kacker et al., 2007; Mathur et al., 2009) used standardized measures to assess child abuse and neglect. Additionally, there is no legal definition covering all forms of childhood abuse and neglect in India. Hence, comparability of prevalence rates reported from different studies in India, and those from India with studies from other nations, is limited in the absence of a standardized tool for measurement. Second, although the MWCD report included data from 13 out of the 28 Indian states, one state excluded from the survey report was Jammu and Kashmir. Notably, no previous study has attempted to assess the rates of abuse and neglect in children from this region (except for a study based on the current sample; Charak & Koot, 2014). The state of Jammu and Kashmir has been a conflict-zone and has faced terrorist activities, which escalated in the late 1980s. As a result Jammu, the winter capital of the state, witnessed migration from many quarters. Furthermore, owing to its special legislative status under Article 370 of the Constitution of India this state often lags behind the rest of India in executing important legislations. For example, corporal punishment in schools is prohibited in all states of India since 2009, except in Jammu and Kashmir (South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children SAIEVAC, 2011). That being said, prior studies highlight the increased risk of violence against children in societies which are in transition due to conflict or post-war (Djeddah, Facchin, Ranzato, & Romer, 2000). Hence, it is important to assess the rates of abuse and neglect in children/adolescents from Jammu and Kashmir.

There are additional societal and cultural reasons that may be related to the high rates of abuse and neglect among children in India. These include but are not limited to, societal sanctioning of physical punishment under the garb of disciplinary practices (Nair et al., 2009; Runyan et al., 2010), stigma associated with sexual abuse (Deb & Mukherjee, 2011; Kacker et al., 2007), the social problem of girl-child neglect (Poffenberger, 1981), the hierarchical structure of the Indian family with less recognition of the rights of children (Segal, 1995), and its high poverty and low literacy rates (Deb & Modak, 2010; Mathur et al., 2009). The enumerated reasons led us to design a research project addressing child abuse and neglect, and their psychological outcomes in adolescents from Jammu. The present study uses a part of the battery of standardized questionnaires administered in that project, and focuses on levels of severity of abuse and neglect, and their association with personality pathology in adolescents from Jammu.

Grouping of Maltreatment and Severity Within Each Type of Maltreatment

Studies addressing the negative impact of child abuse and neglect often focus on one specific type of maltreatment (e.g., sexual abuse) while different types of maltreatment tend to co-occur (for a review see Herrenkohl & Herrenkohl, 2009; Higgins & McCabe, 2001). Therefore, studies focusing only on specific types of maltreatment may impair our view of their combined effect on related psychopathology. In a study based on the LONGSCAN data, Lau et al. (2005) classified a sample of 519 children with a history of alleged maltreatment based on three different criteria: (i) a hierarchy of types wherein active forms of abuse (e.g., sexual abuse) were prioritized over passive types (e.g., emotional neglect); (ii) the highest severity or frequency rating of maltreatment; and (iii) presence or absence of multiple maltreatment. The authors demonstrated that multiple maltreatment types lead to better prediction of psychological outcomes as compared to presence of a single type or absence of any maltreatment. Arata, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Bowers, and O'Brien (2007) in another study on 1,452 middle and high school youth found that those with multiple maltreatment (assessed via the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire), namely, co-occurring physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect had higher scores on hopelessness, depression, suicide proneness, delinquent behavior, substance use problems, and hostility as compared to those with no maltreatment or single-type of maltreatment. Such studies highlight the cumulative and differential impact of co-occurring maltreatment types on the mental health of the child.

Another aspect of maltreatment that studies have failed to take into account is the effect of severity within each type of abuse and neglect on psychopathological outcomes. Prior research studies point toward the utility of employing severity scores within each type of maltreatment as compared to other indices, such as mean of severity or maximum severity across subtypes, for differential assessment of psychopathology (English et al., 2005; Litrownik et al., 2005). Severity of

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