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Case file coding of child maltreatment: Methods, challenges, and innovations in a longitudinal project of youth in foster care☆

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ABSTRACT

State social service agency case files are a common mechanism for obtaining information about a child's maltreatment history, yet these documents are often challenging for researchers to access, and then to process in a manner consistent with the requirements of social science research designs. Specifically, accessing and navigating case files is an extensive undertaking, and a task that many researchers have had to maneuver with little guidance. Even after the files are in hand and the research questions and relevant variables have been clarified, case file information about a child's maltreatment exposure can be idiosyncratic, vague, inconsistent, and incomplete, making coding such information into useful variables for statistical analyses difficult. The Modified Maltreatment Classification System (MMCS) is a popular tool used to guide the process, and though comprehensive, this coding system cannot cover all idiosyncrasies found in case files. It is not clear from the literature how researchers implement this system while accounting for issues outside of the purview of the MMCS or that arise during MMCS use. Finally, a large yet reliable file coding team is essential to the process, however, the literature lacks training guidelines and methods for establishing reliability between coders. In an effort to move the field toward a common approach, the purpose of the present discussion is to detail the process used by one large-scale study of child maltreatment, the Studying Pathways to Adjustment and Resilience in Kids (SPARK) project, a longitudinal study of resilience in youth in foster care. The article addresses each phase of case file coding, from accessing case files, to identifying how to measure constructs of interest, to dealing with exceptions to the coding system, to coding variables reliably, to training large teams of coders and monitoring for fidelity. Implications for a comprehensive and efficient approach to case file coding are discussed.

1. Introduction

Research suggests that over half a million youth are exposed to child maltreatment, many of whom display significant mental and physical health problems over the course of their lives (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Research focused on understanding the impact of maltreatment and developing effective interventions to prevent and ameliorate negative consequences associated with traumatic stress is critical to the wellbeing of many youth. For these research endeavors and subsequent prevention/intervention efforts to be successful, the degree and nature of each youth's maltreatment exposure must be understood to replicate scientific findings and make well-informed recommendations for the field. For instance, if the specifics of a youth's maltreatment history remain largely unknown, researchers are unable to link variables such as severity and chronicity to pertinent outcomes, preventing clear explanations for why some youth develop problems while others exhibit better functioning. Service providers are then unable to direct youth to the appropriate services given their exposure history and risk for poor consequences. At face value, measuring maltreatment appears to be a rather simple practice – either an event or experience happened or it did not. However, despite the numerous strategies for measuring maltreatment and the large body of research that variably utilizes said strategies, a deeper look into the

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process of maltreatment measurement quickly illustrates the difficulties associated with sorting out this complex construct.

One way researchers determine the presence and extent of maltreatment is to review the state social service agency's case files, usually a set of records composed of narrative descriptions and legal conclusions about the nature of the child's experiences (Feiring & Zielinski, 2011). Case files are viewed as a good source of information given that they contain reports of alleged maltreatment made to Child Protective Services (CPS) through hotline calls (i.e., phone calls) from mandated reporters as well as others who interacted with the children and families in question (DePanfilis, 2006). Further, these files include the conclusions of these hotline calls, specifying whether a given report was investigated and if the allegation was ultimately substantiated. Previous research has supported the use of case file data and demonstrated the level of rigor that can be achieved in studies that utilize such records (Brownell & Jutte, 2013; Green et al., 2015). One argument that has been made is that case file records are not subject to the social desirability bias likely to be present in self-report of parenting behaviors (MacMillan, Jamieson, & Walsh, 2003), nor are they affected by forgetting, misremembering, or failure to disclose, all of which may be present in child self-report (Greenhoot, 2011). Case files, which are able to provide externally validated information across a number of years, contribute to rich longitudinal datasets from which researchers can explore different facets of maltreatment as well as relevant predictors and outcomes.

Although numerous studies have used case file reports to measure maltreatment exposure (Fisher, Burraston, & Pears, 2005; Mennen, Kim, Sang, & Trickett, 2010; Merrick, Litrownik, Everson, & Cox, 2008; Taussig, Culhane, Garrido, Knudston, & Petrenko, 2013), and many have used comprehensive coding systems (e.g., Modified Maltreatment Classification System [MMCS; English & the LONGSCAN Investigators, 1997]), lack of information on *how* researchers code case file data, particularly when such data falls outside the scope of the coding system, prevents the field from comparing and interpreting results (Green et al., 2015). For example, a parent hitting a child would be coded as physical abuse within every coding system, but some coding systems do not clarify whether hitting a child in the arm multiple times should be coded as one instance of physical abuse or multiple. Further, it is unclear whether hitting a child on his or her arm, back, and leg within the same time frame should count as three separate events or one event. In part, the answer to this question lies with a researcher's study goals and what the researcher is interested in analyzing; perhaps frequency or severity is not of interest at all. However, it would be helpful to know methods of measurement to understand how the field is measuring maltreatment so that findings can be compared and replicated.

Further compounding this issue is the limited space devoted to the coding process in a typical journal article. Without knowing how a given project coded the vast, and at times, incomplete, material available in a child's case file, replication of research using the same maltreatment coding metrics is almost impossible. Further, although research teams may purchase training and consultation through highly experienced groups such as the Consortium of Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (LONGSCAN), this is not a realistic option for all projects. A unification of coding approaches can be facilitated through freely accessible and shared accounts of how various research teams have handled common coding difficulties. Thus, the purpose of the present discussion is to provide an example of the file coding process used by the research team of a longitudinal study of resilience in maltreated youth in foster care (Studying Pathways to Resilience and Adjustment in Kids [SPARK]), beginning with accessing the case files to solving coding problems. The description provided herein, of the procedures and methodological changes throughout the complex process of developing a standard way of coding inherently complicated data, is meant to provide recommendations for other researchers planning to utilize case file data in their future research endeavors, and to begin a conversation amongst researchers involved in coding maltreatment about best practices for case file coding.

2. The SPARK project

The SPARK project is a federally funded research initiative examining risk and protective processes related to emotional/behavioral, academic, and physical health outcomes in youth who reside in foster home settings or residential facilities. Data were collected over the course of five years, resulting in 518 participating youth at time point 1, and 302 participating youth across all 3 time points. To be included in the study youth had to be 1) eight years old or older, 2) in state custody for at least 30 days, and 3) have no developmental delay diagnoses (i.e., autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability).

The state-authorized foster care administration and district county circuit court were the legal guardians of all youth in the study and these officials provided consent for youth participation. Consent was also obtained from foster caregivers and assent from each of the youth. For more information on how SPARK participants were recruited and enrolled, see Jackson, Gabrielli, Tunno, & Hambrick, (2012). The SPARK project collected both youth self-report and case file reports of maltreatment to provide a robust assessment of maltreatment experiences amongst the youth in the sample. Case files for each youth in the study were provided by the state social service agency. Below, the process used to both obtain and navigate the files and then of measuring information contained within the files is described. A thorough description of the procedures and methodological adaptations needed to capture the nuances of case file coding will provide the field with lessons learned and techniques adopted following those lessons learned. Table 1 summarizes the key challenges and recommendations for coding case files discussed below.

2.1. File coding process

2.1.1. Accessing case files

Coding case files to ascertain the degree and nature of maltreatment is only possible after successful acquisition of those files. This step is clearly essential to the process, yet can prove more convoluted than expected. What follows is a brief description of the major steps taken and lessons learned, as a more in-depth review of this process is available through Green et al. (2015).

Given the highly sensitive nature of the information included in case files of children in state custody, establishing a trusting relationship between the researchers and state child protective services personnel was necessary. First, several meetings with knowledgeable stakeholders from the state occurred to ensure that accessing information (i.e., the case file of the child in custody) was feasible. Next, releases for each child (signed by CPS administrative staff) were obtained to ensure security and authorization of the case files. Then, procedures for data-sharing were established. Identifying and contacting an appropriate person(s) to facilitate data-sharing was critical to the successful obtainment of hundreds of case files.

The SPARK team hired a retired state agency worker (e.g., the CPS liaison) who helped the team access new files as youth were recruited into the study. The information in the files was left essentially intact except for any reference to the name of the caller to the hotline and any person's social security number, which was redacted by the CPS liaison. When conducting research within state agencies, it is particularly important to recognize the already large workload expected of CPS caseworkers (Jackson et al., 2012). Maintaining a CPS liaison, paid by the SPARK team, helped ensure that case managers did not have to take time from their already overloaded schedules to obtain and redact case files.