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Child abuse, self-control, and delinquency: A general strain perspective

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examined the independent effects of child abuse on self-control and delinquency and explored whether self-control mediates the child abuse–delinquency relationship.

Methods: We employed path modeling in Mplus to examine the relationship between child abuse, self-control, and delinquency using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health).

Results: Net of theoretically important controls, child abuse has direct and indirect effects on delinquency, and the relationship is partially explained by low self-control.

Conclusions: Child abuse has an independent influence on levels of self-control, supporting a proposition made by general strain theory, and self-control partially mediates the oft-observed relationship between child abuse and delinquency.

1. Introduction

Research consistently demonstrates that low self-control is an important cause of both offending (see Pratt & Cullen, 2000) and victimization (see Pratt, Turanovic, Fox, & Wright, 2014). In contrast, few studies have examined the impact of victimization on self-control, and the limited results are mixed (Agnew et al., 2011; Monahan, King, Shulman, Cauffman, & Chassin, 2015; Sullivan, Farrell, Kliever, Vulin-Reynolds, & Valois, 2007). Agnew's (1992, 2006) general strain theory (GST) predicts, in part, that low self-control mediates the relationship between victimization and delinquency. GST highlights child abuse, in particular, as a severe form of strain likely to lead to delinquency (Agnew, 2001, 2013). Despite this fact, no research has examined the extent to which these GST predictions regarding the nature of the relationship between victimization, self-control, and delinquency are observed within the context of child abuse victimization. Here, we use a GST framework to examine how child abuse impacts self-control and whether self-control mediates the relationship between child abuse and adolescent delinquency. We test these predictions using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). We begin with a review of GST and the relevant literature.

2. Theoretical framework and prior research

In this section, we discuss GST (Agnew, 1992, 2006) as it relates to

child abuse, self-control, and delinquency. First, we examine GST and its predictions regarding the relationship between victimization and delinquency, paying particular attention to the research on the link between child abuse and delinquency. Then, we discuss the role self-control plays in GST. We focus on the GST claim that the strain of victimization—such as child abuse—can reduce self-control, discussing the research examining the influence of victimization on self-control, the impact of childhood trauma on brain development, and the association between negative parenting and self-control.

2.1. General strain theory and child abuse

GST explains why certain people engage in delinquent and criminal behavior. Agnew claimed that individuals commit crime as a way to relieve psychological strain (Agnew, 1992, 2006). People experience three broad categories of strains: (1) losing something valued, (2) being exposed to something unpleasant, and (3) failing to achieve valued goals. Strain causes an individual to experience negative emotions, such as anger, depression, or fear. According to the theory, if people experience strain and lack alternative coping mechanisms, then they may resort to crime in order to relieve their negative emotions. Agnew (2001) asserted that certain types of strain are more likely to lead to criminal behavior. In particular, he stated that the most criminogenic strains are those that are perceived as unjust, strains that are high in magnitude, strains that are caused by or associated with low social

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control, and strains that create a pressure/incentive to engage in criminal coping behaviors.

Agnew (2001, 2002) has argued that victimization is one of the most consequential forms of strain. In fact, Agnew (2001, 2013) discussed a specific form of victimization—child abuse—as a particularly criminogenic form of strain. Victimization possesses the characteristics of strains most likely to lead to crime (Agnew, 2001). Victims are likely to perceive themselves as having been treated unfairly, viewing the perpetrator's actions as unjustified. Victimization—particularly violent victimization—is generally very high in magnitude: it is an incredibly noxious experience likely to produce severe strain. Agnew (2001) also pointed out that victimization is more likely to take place in situations characterized by low levels of social control. Finally, victimization can create pressure to engage in criminal coping, perhaps by providing a justification for delinquent behavior or because it is associated with the social learning of crime (Agnew, 2001).

Numerous studies examining GST demonstrate that victimization is associated with various forms of offending (e.g., Agnew, 2002; Hay & Evans, 2006; Iratzoqui, 2015; Lin, Cochran, & Mieczkowski, 2011; Neff & Waite, 2007; Watts & McNulty, 2013). Using panel data from the National Survey of Children (NSC), Hay and Evans (2006) found that violent victimization was positively associated with future substance use and violent/property offending. Agnew (2002) looked at the relationship between victimization and offending using a nationally representative sample of male high school students. He found that, controlling for prior delinquency, violent victimization was associated with higher levels of delinquency. Lin et al. (2011) examined nationally representative cross-sectional data from the National Survey of Adolescents and found that violent victimization was associated with both violent/property crime and drug use. In addition to direct victimization, research suggests that indirect victimization (e.g., the victimization of friends or family) is also associated with offending (Agnew, 2002; Lin et al., 2011).

Research examining the relationship between child abuse and delinquency reflects the broader findings of victimization and offending, providing support for GST arguments related to child abuse: Child abuse is associated with a wide range of future delinquent and criminal behaviors, including violent crime and aggression (Chapple, 2003; Herrenkohl, Huang, Tajima, & Whitney, 2003; Salzinger, Rosario, & Feldman, 2007), substance use (Bergen, Martin, Richardson, Allison, & Roeger, 2004; Brems, Johnson, Neal, & Freemon, 2004; Gutierrez & Van Puymbroek, 2006; Ompad et al., 2005), intimate partner violence (Godbout et al., 2017; Gómez, 2011), sexual offending (DeLisi, Kosloski, Vaughn, Caudill, & Trulson, 2014), and general antisocial behavior (Dembo, Schmeidler, & Childs, 2007; Gao, Wong, & Yu, 2016; Klika, Herrenkohl, & Lee, 2013; Smith, Park, Ireland, Elwyn, & Thornberry, 2013; Teague, Mazerolle, Legosz, & Sanderson, 2008; Watts, 2016). A meta-analysis examining the negative impacts of non-sexual child maltreatment by Norman et al. (2012) found that across over 100 studies, non-sexual child maltreatment was consistently associated with future drug abuse, suicide attempts, and risky sexual behavior.

Several studies have examined child abuse from a GST perspective (e.g., Brezina, 1998; Hollist, Hughes, & Schaible, 2009; Iratzoqui, 2015; Watts & McNulty, 2013). Using Add Health data, Iratzoqui (2015) found that victims of child abuse and neglect were more likely to engage in delinquent coping strategies during adolescence, including substance abuse and selling drugs. Watts and McNulty (2013) also tested GST predictions on the impact of child abuse using the Add Health survey. The authors found that child abuse—including physical and sexual abuse by parents or caregivers—was positively associated with adolescent delinquency (an index of criminal behavior including violent crimes, property crimes, and drug selling). Watts and McNulty (2013) also found that depression partially mediated the effects of physical abuse on offending, providing some support for another GST prediction. Though Hollist et al. (2009) utilized a slightly older sample (adolescents

rather than children), they also examined the link between maltreatment by parents and delinquency. Using cross-sectional data from the NSC, the researchers found that adolescent maltreatment—which included measures of physical punishment, parental withdrawal of love, emotional abuse, and absence of parental support—was associated with general delinquency, serious violent delinquency, and substance use. The study also suggested that some of the effect of maltreatment on delinquency was mediated by negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, and depression. Finally, another study of adolescent maltreatment lends further support to GST (Brezina, 1998). Brezina utilized two waves of the Youth in Transition survey, a national study of male public high school students. He found that adolescent maltreatment by parents (physical and verbal abuse) was positively associated with delinquency, and these effects worked through a variety of mechanisms, including anger. Taken together, these studies lend support to the GST prediction that child abuse leads to delinquency.

2.2. General strain theory and self-control

Though self-control is a concept primarily associated with Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) self-control theory, self-control plays an important role in GST, as well. GST posits two main claims regarding self-control. First, GST suggests that self-control influences how people react to strain. Research generally supports this claim: self-control appears to moderate the effects of strain—including victimization—on offending (e.g., Agnew, Brezina, Wright, & Cullen, 2002; Hay & Evans, 2006; Turanovic & Pratt, 2013).

Second, GST suggests that repeated exposure to strain can reduce self-control, thus leading to delinquent behavior (Agnew, 2006; Agnew et al., 2011). This argument implies that negative emotions are not the only mechanisms through which strain leads to delinquency; rather, reduced self-control also mediates some of the influence of strain on criminal behavior. There is little research examining this proposition, though a few studies have examined how victimization impacts self-control (Agnew et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2007). Overall, the results are mixed. Agnew et al. (2011) found some support for the GST claims regarding victimization and self-control. The authors utilized several waves of the GREAT data to examine whether victimization reduced self-control. They found evidence that victimization within the past year was associated with decreased self-control among adolescents, but victimization was unrelated to self-control in subsequent waves. This suggests that any influence of victimization on self-control may be fairly contemporaneous. Sullivan et al. (2007) also found no support for victimization reducing future self-control. The researchers examined the impact of violence on self-control and subsequent delinquency within a sample of rural sixth graders. They found no relationship between victimization reported at the beginning of the year and self-control measured at the end of the school year. Similarly, indirect victimization (i.e., witnessing violence) was unrelated to subsequent self-control. More recently, Monahan et al. (2015) examined the impact of victimization on both impulse control and future orientation among a sample of juvenile offenders. The researchers found that victimization was associated with a slower growth in future orientation during adolescence and early adulthood. They also found that an increase in victimization during adolescence was associated with a reduction in impulse control the following year, but this pattern did not hold in young adulthood. The potential contemporaneous impact of victimization on self-control suggested by some of these studies is not necessarily inconsistent with GST predictions (Agnew, 2006; Agnew et al., 2011). Much of the GST discussion on this topic focuses on how strain impacts self-control in the near-term, with the deleterious effects assumed to diminish over time as the negative emotions abate. However, GST also argues that chronic victimization—such as child abuse—could result in a more enduring decrease in self-control. Taken together, these studies provide mixed evidence as to whether victimization influences self-control, particularly in the long term.

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