Intimate partner violence and the overlap of perpetration and victimization: Considering the influence of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in childhood

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Using data from Wave 4 of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, this study examined the independent relationship of childhood maltreatment type (emotional, sexual, physical) on IPV victimization and perpetration; then mutually exclusive categories of IPV involvement (victimization, perpetration, and victimization/perpetration) were investigated. IPV victimization and perpetration were assessed using items from the revised Conflict Tactics Scales. A series of binary regression models and multinomial regression models were estimated. Models were stratified across gender. Results uncovered significant relationships between child physical abuse and IPV victimization as well as IPV perpetration for males and females, but this effect was reduced when emotional maltreatment was added to the model. When IPV victimization/perpetration was considered, maltreatment effects changed. For males, physical maltreatment remained significantly related to victimization only and physical, sexual, and emotional maltreatment were related to victimization/perpetration. For females, physical maltreatment remained significantly related to IPV victimization only and emotional maltreatment was related to perpetration only and to victimization/perpetration. Screening and intervention for maltreatment, including emotional maltreatment, among children as well as adults with IPV histories may be important to preventing first IPV experiences and stemming current involvement.

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1. Introduction

Child maltreatment is prevalent and linked to a variety of negative outcomes, including violence within intimate relationships (e.g., Ehrensaft et al., 2003). Research grounded in the “cycle of violence,” however, is limited in that it has often excluded emotional maltreatment as a component of child maltreatment. Further, this research base has primarily examined the impact of child maltreatment on later intimate partner violence (IPV) victimization or perpetration, but often does not distinguish between those who are only victims or perpetrators versus those who are both (but see Richards, Jennings, Tomsich, & Gover, 2016). Thus, it is possible that our understanding of the cycle of violence could be enhanced by considering...
the effect of emotional abuse in the context of child maltreatment on subsequent IPV victimization, perpetration, and the perpetration and victimization of IPV. We attend to these matters in the current study.

2. Literature review

Children and adolescents experience high rates of physical, sexual, and emotional maltreatment by caretakers (CDC, 2014; Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015; Hussey, Chang, & Kotch, 2006). For instance, the 2013–2014 National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence indicated that 15% of children and teens experienced at least one form of child maltreatment (physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, neglect, or custodial interference or family abduction) in the previous year (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Exposure to violence and victimization can be highly detrimental, both in the short-term (Gomez, 2011; Herrenkohl, Mason, Kosterman, Lengua, Hawkins, & Abbott, 2004; Murphy, 2011) and long-term (Stith et al., 2000; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2014). Childhood physical and sexual maltreatment have been associated with a range of negative consequences, including both IPV perpetration and victimization (Bensley, Van Eenwyk, Wynkoop, & Simmons, 2003; Ehrenstaft et al., 2003; Herrenkohl, Chung, & Catalano, 2004; Jennings, Richards, Tomsich, & Gover, 2015; Renner & Slack, 2006; Roberts, McLaughlin, Conron, & Koenen, 2011; Stith et al., 2000). Studies such as these suggest a causal relationship between prior victimization and later perpetration of violence via the intergenerational transmission of violence or “the cycle of violence,” whereby children who experience family of origin violence are more likely to learn the utility of violence and model violence in their own relationships (Widom, 1989). According to this perspective, individuals who experience family of origin abuse may be more likely to accept violence as an expected aspect of interpersonal relationships and experience an increased risk of relationship violence victimization as well. Conversely, they may be at risk for perpetrating subsequent IPV because they have seen it modeled in their family environment (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008). This rationale stems from social learning theory, which holds that individuals learn through observation and operant conditioning (Bandura, 1977). In support, multiple studies have found empirical associations between family of origin violence and an increased risk of later IPV victimization and perpetration (e.g., Ehrenstaft et al., 2003; Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva, 1998; Stith et al., 2000; Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Triss, 2004; Widom et al., 2014).

Consistent with these theoretical underpinnings (i.e., that abused children might become a perpetrator or victim of later IPV), studies examining childhood maltreatment and subsequent intimate partner violence have primarily examined victimization and perpetration of IPV separately: few have considered the impact of child maltreatment on subsequent victimization and perpetration of violence within intimate partnerships. It is possible that failure to consider this third category of victims and offenders masks important differences between those who are in a relationship with mutual violence versus those who are a victim (or perpetrator) only. For example, Caetano, Ramissety-Minkler, and Field (2005) examined the influence of childhood physical abuse on both IPV victimization and perpetration and found that among females, childhood physical abuse was associated with both perpetrating physical violence against their partner and experiencing physical victimization from their partner (i.e., bi-directional violence), while among males, childhood physical abuse predicted perpetrating physical partner violence only. Further, Richards et al. (2016) examined the relationship between physical and sexual abuse and IPV “victimization only,” “perpetration only,” or “victimization and perpetration” (compared to no IPV involvement) among U.S. college students. Findings showed that sexual abuse increased the likelihood of membership in the IPV victim–perpetrator group, but not membership in the victim-only or perpetrator-only groups, while physical abuse was not associated with membership in any of the IPV groups (compared to no IPV involvement). Thus, it is possible that being both a victim and a perpetrator of IPV has a unique etiology with regard to the cycle of violence; that is, these studies suggest that various types of childhood victimization (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse) may influence subsequent victimization, perpetration, and victimization–perpetration differently for males and females.

One type of maltreatment that has received less attention in the cycle of violence research, and virtually no attention in the bi-directional IPV literature, is the impact of childhood emotional maltreatment. Emotional abuse is often omitted from scholarly examinations of childhood and adolescent trauma (Finkelhor, Omrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005), but is both highly prevalent and potentially damaging to later outcomes. In fact, Finkelhor et al. (2015) found that it was reported at overall greater rates than other types of maltreatment for respondents’ ages 6–17 years old. The nascent evidence of child emotional maltreatment and the cycle of violence has been mixed, though, with some studies finding that emotional abuse contributes to IPV meaningfully – and uniquely – apart from physical and/or sexual child abuse. For instance, Seedat, Stein, and Ford (2005) found that among a large sample of women, childhood emotional abuse as well as sexual abuse were significantly associated with later intimate partner violence victimization, but physical abuse was not. Further, Crawford and Wright (2007) found that childhood emotional abuse predicted perpetration of relationship aggression among college students, when using a combined measure of physical, emotional, and sexual aggression, as well as separate measures, and when controlling for relevant predictors, such as other forms of child abuse. They also found evidence that childhood emotional abuse was related to intimate partner victimization.

The importance of emotional abuse to subsequent IPV involvement may be explained by attachment theory primarily because secure child–caregiver attachment is critical for children to develop working models of interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1969, 1982). Secure child–caregiver attachment engenders in the child a strong sense of security and trust in the world as they mature, giving them the confidence to explore their environment and develop secure relationships with others over the life course. Conversely, insensitivity or unresponsiveness on the part of a primary caregiver(s) results in an insecure attachment in the child, causing feelings of fear and/or anxiety and a view that the world is characterized by rejection and
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