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Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

Life after the pan and the fire: Depression, order, attachment, and the legacy of abuse among North Korean refugee youth and adolescent children of North Korean refugees[☆]

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Dedicated to the memory of my aunt Carol, who always had a heart for children.

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ABSTRACT

Given previous research on depression, history of physical abuse, family order, attachment, and parenting, we hypothesized that the physical abuse–depression relationship would be moderated by (a) family order and (b) attachment, and that (c) attachment and family order would interact significantly in predicting depression. Hypotheses were tested in South Korea in a random cluster sample of 82 youth aged 15–25 who were either themselves North Korean refugees ($n = 39$) or who were born to North Korean refugee mothers in China ($n = 43$). A qualitative interview was used to shed further light on the findings. Family order appears to be a protective factor against depression in that more order is associated with a weakened past abuse–depression relationship.

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Introduction

An unthinkable, heartrending refugee crisis lurks behind the media hysteria around nuclear weapons and Kim Jong Eun's haircut. Among the crimes against humanity perpetrated against those who would defect from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) are "extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortions and other sexual violence" (UN COI, 14 pp.). As in the darkest moments of the 19th and 20th centuries an underground railroad evacuating some of the most oppressed people on earth now stretches across a large swath of the globe. Today that railroad, staffed by an incongruous but heroic band of human rights activists, Christians, and professional brokers, is in East Asia (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Its passengers are mainly women and children.

Many of the children were born in North Korea but increasingly the passengers on the 'Seoul Train' (Butterworth, 2004) are children born in China. They come occasionally from voluntary relationships between North Korean women and Korean Chinese or Han Chinese men but most frequently they result from coerced unions when North Korean women are trafficked into slavery in China. In China North Koreans are forcibly sent back to North Korea if caught and the government offers rewards for turning them in (CRS, 2007). Human trafficking flourishes in the shadow of DPRK crimes against humanity because escape by victims is punished not by a pimp or 'husband' but by the systematically dehumanizing and frequently

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lethal policies of two states. Between 80 and 90% of North Koreans in China wind up being trafficked (CRS Report, 2007). This rate may be higher among women given the highly skewed gender ratio in rural China (Zhang, Attane, & Yang, 2009).

Fear of detection induces PTSD-like symptoms in North Korean refugees hiding in China (Chang, Haggard, & Noland, 2008) and trafficked women with children face a devil's choice. If their illegal status becomes known do they flee with their children via the underground railroad (which poses great risk to all), or do they flee alone, leaving their children in dubious safety with the fathers? The wrong choice can have lethal consequences for the child.

When North Korean women choose to flee with their children and the railroad operators succeed in helping them the children, both Chinese born and North Korea born, are likely to wind up in South Korea where they are considered citizens under the constitution (Tanaka, 2008). Apart from harrowing tales of survival little is known about these children. North Korea born refugee youth are at higher risk for current physical abuse (Kim, Choi, & Chae, 2012) and are on average shorter and thinner than their South Korean counterparts (Choi, Park, & Joung, 2010). They have serious emotional and behavioral problems and their mental health difficulties are thought to stem from traumatic experiences, long defection duration, and an as yet short period of adaptation (Lee, 2013). As a group North Korean refugees are at high risk for PTSD (Kim, Choi, & Ryou, 2012; Suh, 2006), depression (Cho, Jeun, Yu, & Um, 2005; Han, 2001; Song, 2005), and stress due to the difficulty of adaptation (Kim, 2004). The pressing question facing those at the Seoul terminus is: how serious are the consequences of these harrowing experiences and what might buffer these children from aftershocks? This paper examines family order (Emery, Thapa, Do, & Chan, 2014) and attachment to parents (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Styron & Janoff-Bulman, 1997) as potential factors that may mitigate the impact of abuse on depression in a sample of 82 North Korean refugee youth in Seoul. The quantitative material is supplemented with results from a qualitative interview conducted with one of the youth surveyed.

Legacy of Abuse

Tolerance for and perpetration of family violence by North Korean refugees living in South Korea is strongly related to adjustment to the new life circumstances (Kim & Nam, 2013). The children of North Korean refugees often have a serious history of suffering abuse both within and outside the family. Kim, Choi, and Chae (2012) found that children of North Korean refugees suffered higher rates of neglect and physical and emotional abuse than South Korean children and that depression was a risk factor for perpetration of abuse. Among adults caregivers responding to their survey 56% had been beaten with a stick on the hands or legs while growing up, 47% had been punched or kicked, and 23% reported being hit with an object and so injured (Kim, Choi, & Chae, 2012). With respect to their own children now living in South Korea 53% of the caregivers reported minor physical abuse of their children and 22% reported severe physical abuse. This compares to 28% and 8%, respectively, among South Koreans (Kim, Choi, & Chae, 2012; Kim, Choi, & Ryou, 2012). Previous research has established that a history of physical abuse as a child is a substantial risk factor for depression in adulthood (Bernet & Stein, 1999; Heim et al., 2000).

Research on North Korean refugees is scant but research on child refugees in general shows that they are at increased risk for child maltreatment (Euser, van Ijzendoorn, Prinzie, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010). McKelvey and Webb (1995) found a history of physical or sexual abuse among 22% of males and 18% of females in their Amerasian sample. Thabet, Tischler, and Vostanis (2004) found an emotional abuse prevalence rate of 12.6% among children in Palestine but the rate was significantly higher among families in refugee camps. In a sample of refugees from Northern Uganda Saile, Ertl, Neuner, and Catani (2014) found that the most important risk factors for self-reported abuse of children by parents were parents' experience of abuse in childhood, intimate partner violence, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from war experiences, and problems with alcohol. Hence, the authors argued that war was a contributor to family violence against children. However, literature on the abuse of refugee children generally remains underdeveloped.

Order and Attachment

The concept of family or relationship order was developed by Emery (2011) for the purpose of classifying different types of domestic violence. Order is frequently defined by its absence "acts of disorder are in violation of a legitimized normative structure" (Gould, 65 pp.). It follows that order implies the existence of a legitimized normative structure and some degree of compliance, with higher levels of order implying both a more elaborated normative structure and more compliance. Emery (2011) linked this to Stark's (2007) 'sweatshirt case' in which an apparent act of concern (giving a sweatshirt) carried a covert warning that a female partner's behavior was unacceptable. Stark described coercive control as control extended to "mundane areas of everyday life that are not normally. . . rule-governed" (p. 229). By our definition such relationships have high levels of order.

Based on Emery's (2011) typology Emery, Wu, and Tsolmon (2015) hypothesized that both high and low order would be a risk factor for more intimate partner violence (IPV) injury. Although they found high order to be a risk factor, low order was not a risk factor for IPV injury in their Mongolian sample. On the other hand family order was found to be negatively associated with physical child abuse severity in Kathmandu (Emery et al., 2014). One interpretation of the disparate findings in the two studies is that disorder or social disorganization explanations (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Shaw & McKay, 1969) are most relevant for child abuse but deviant (high) order explanations (Emery, 2011) are most relevant for IPV. Instead the authors surmised that probably both very high and very low order are risk factors for both child abuse and IPV. They note that although the squared term for order was not significant it was in the right direction (indicating an upward

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