



Childhood history of abuse and child abuse potential: The role of parent's gender and timing of childhood abuse



A. Romero-Martínez^b, B. Figueiredo^a, L. Moya-Albiol^{b,*}

^a School of Psychology, University of Minho, Portugal

^b Department of Psychobiology, University of Valencia, Spain

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ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that being physically abused leads to someone becoming a perpetrator of abuse which could be associated to parents' gender, timing of the physical abuse and specific socio-demographic variables. This study aims to investigate the role the parents' gender, timing of childhood abuse and socio-demographic variables on the relationship between parents' history of childhood physical abuse and current risk for children. The sample consisted of 920 parents (414 fathers, 506 mothers) from the Portuguese National Representative Study of Psychosocial Context of Child Abuse and Neglect who completed the Childhood History Questionnaire and the Child Abuse Potential Inventory. The results showed that fathers had lower current potential risk of becoming physical abuse perpetrators with their children than mothers although they did not differ in their physical victimization history. Moreover, the risk was higher in parents (both genders) with continuous history of victimization than in parents without victimization. Prediction models showed that for fathers and mothers separately similar socio-demographic variables (family income, number of children at home, employment status and marital status) predicted the potential risk of becoming physical abusers perpetrators. Nevertheless, the timing of victimization was different for fathers (before 13 years old) and mothers (after 13 years old). Then our study targets specific variables (timing of physical abuse, parents' gender and specific socio-demographic variables), which may enable professionals to select groups of parents at greater need of participating in abuse prevention programs.

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Introduction

Being physically abused leads to someone becoming a perpetrator of abuse (Caykoylu, Ibiloglu, Taner, Potas, & Taner, 2011; Paúl, Milner, & Múgica, 1995; Newcomb & Locke, 2001; Rikhye et al., 2008; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Chyi-In, 1991; Zaidi, Knutson, & Mehm, 1989). That would be partially explained by structural and functional brain abnormalities in maltreated children (Mesa-Gresa & Moya-Albiol, 2011). Moreover, the early social learning models might explain the intergenerational transmission of abusive parent behavior (Muller, Hunter, & Stollak, 1995). Such models might explain why both childhood receipt of physical abuse and observation of spousal abuse impact on adult likelihood of child maltreatment (Schluter, Tautolo, & Paterson, 2011). Further models such as attachment and trauma mediation models could explain the intergenerational transmission of parents' abusive behaviors with their offspring (Amos, Furber, & Segal, 2011; Joubert, Webster, & Hackett, 2012; Morton & Browne, 1998; Rodriguez & Tucker, 2011). Parents who were abused can also use more frequently the punitive discipline techniques that they received (Rodriguez & Sutherland, 1999). This process was defined as the 'cycle of violence'. Perpetuating factors are those that affect the family in a continuing or ongoing way. The relationship

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychobiology, University of Valencia, Avenida Blasco Ibañez, 21, 46010 Valencia, Spain.

between the effects of being abused during childhood and the medium and long term effects is moderated by different variables such as the kind of abuse, its intensity and duration and the child's gender (Mesa-Gresa & Moya-Albiol, 2011).

For women, physical abuse in childhood significantly influenced perceptions of their relationship with children. However, physical abuse was not significantly associated with later parenting in fathers (Sandberg, Feldhousenb, & Busbya, 2012). Typically, more mothers use physical punishment than fathers (Ferrari, 2002; Uslu, Kapci, Yildirim, & Oney, 2010), although fathers were highly over-represented as perpetrators of physical child abuse, particularly in its most severe forms (Guterman & Lee, 2005). However, some studies did not show differences between fathers and mothers as perpetrators of abuse on their offspring (Browne & Hamilton, 1998; Nobes, Smith, Upton, & Heverin, 1999). Physical abuse was confined to family members and its prevalence rates were similar in different cultures (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn, & Alink, 2013). Most physical abuses began prior to the age of 13, with half continuing after that age (Marysko et al., 2010; Sushil et al., 2004). Children (both genders) who experienced physical abuse prior to puberty presented higher rates of abusive behaviors than those with physical abuse after puberty (de Paúl & Domenech, 2000; Milner, Robertson, & Rogers, 1990), and a recent study found that childhood-limited maltreatment does not significantly increase the odds of maltreatment perpetration. However, maltreatment victimization, especially during adolescence or beginning in childhood and persisting into adolescence, is a likely cause of subsequent perpetration. Thus, developmental theories sustain that what occurs early in the life has a significant importance for later development. Nevertheless, for life-course theories, recent as well as distant events are important for the course of life (Thornberry & Henry, 2013).

Physically abusive families had significantly more often a low income and less education, younger parents, and more frequently presented a family history of physical victimization (Caliso & Milner, 1992; de Paúl & Domenech, 2000; Wolfe, Edwards, Manion, & Koverola, 1988; Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991), had social isolation, marital problems and more children than they could handle as well as a poor supporting environment (Dietrich, Berkowitz, Kadushin, & McGloin, 1990; Hidroglu, Topuzoğlu, Ay, & Karavuş, 2006; Moracco, Runyan, Bowling, & Earp, 2007; Ünal, 2005). The absence of that socio-economic resources and abilities act as a catalytic factor for becoming perpetrators of physical abuse, in parents with a previous history of physical victimization (Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991).

With all this in mind, using data from a community survey with Portuguese parents, the aim of the current investigation was twofold. First, we investigated whether the parents' gender and the timing of the parents' history of abuse affects the current risk of becoming physical abuse perpetrators with their children. As mothers classically tend to be more physically aggressive with their offspring than fathers (Appel & Holden, 1998; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2006), we would expect that mothers presented a higher risk of maltreating their children than fathers. Moreover, as the history of childhood abuse (earlier, during adolescence or continuous) increases the rate of becoming a perpetrator of abuse in adulthood (de Paúl & Domenech, 2000; Milner et al., 1990; Thornberry & Henry, 2013), we would expect that parents (both genders) with some history of abuse during their early lives (in adolescence or continuous) presented higher predisposition to child abuse than parents without history of childhood abuse. Finally, the role of parents' childhood experience of physical maltreatment during childhood and adolescence (before, after 13 and before + after 13) and socio-demographic variables on the predispositions to child abuse in parents, separately for fathers and mothers, will be examined. Considering the importance of the continuous history of abuse to become an abuse perpetrator (de Paúl & Domenech, 2000; Milner, Robertson, & Rogers, 1990; Thornberry & Henry, 2013), we would expect that in parents (both genders), continuous history of abuse would be a better predictor of predisposition to child abuse. Moreover, due to the importance of some socio-demographic variables such as educational level, employment status, family income, parents' age and number of children, in the inter-generational continuity of child maltreatment (Appleyard, Berlin, Rosanbalm, & Dodge, 2011; Gilbert et al., 2009; Stith et al., 2009), we would expect to find that low economic level, parent's age, professional status and/or educational level together with a high number of children increased the risk of offspring maltreatment, independently of the parents' gender. Given the importance of this complex research topic for understanding the cycle of human violence and for establishing effective prevention programs, we first need to understand the nature and strength of the relationship between a history of maltreatment victimization and the potential risk of becoming physical abuse perpetrators.

Method

Participants

The sample was composed by 920 parents that participated in the National Representative Study of Psychosocial Context of Child Abuse and Neglect in Portugal. Parents ranged from 22 to 66 in age and had on average 1.92 children ($SD = 0.91$, range = 1–9). The overall rate of compliance from parents (i.e., in returning the questionnaires) was 69% ($N = 1021$), and the rate of correctly completed and returned questionnaires was 63% [68% (506) for mothers and 58% (414) for fathers].

Procedure

Participants were a subset of parents in the National Representative Study of Psychosocial Context of Child Abuse and Neglect in Portugal (PCCANP). Participants were mothers and fathers of children randomly selected in five public elementary schools of Northern Portugal. All parents whose children attended the selected schools were contacted in the year 2000. Regional education authorities (DREN, Direção Regional da Educação do Norte) provided ethical approval for the current

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