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Early maltreatment is associated with greater risk of conduct problems and lack of guilt in adolescence[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Previous research indicates a link between childhood maltreatment and elevated conduct problems. Yet the literature is less clear on associations between maltreatment and callousness (e.g., lack of empathy or guilt). This is a critical gap given that callousness is a robust predictor of serious aggressive and violent behavior. We examine the association between substantiated maltreatment events in childhood and adolescence (up to age 13) and conduct problems and lack of guilt at age 14. We analyze self- and parent-report data along with official maltreatment records on 557 youth (50% female; 69% non-white) from a larger dataset (Longitudinal Studies on Childhood Abuse and Neglect; $N = 1354$). Results of multinomial logistic regression models indicate that youth with histories of substantiated maltreatment events are more likely to have elevated conduct problems and decreased guilt at age 14, particularly if they experienced maltreatment before the age of four years old. Youth who exhibit conduct problems and also appear to lack guilt are more likely to have a personal history of substantiated maltreatment. We discuss our results in terms of their implications for theory and practice.

1. Introduction

Child maltreatment is a pervasive and disastrous public health problem that affects hundreds of thousands in the United States alone, with 3.2 million receiving child protective services (CPS) responses in 2014, and over 700,000 with substantiated maltreatment claims (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Administration on Children, Youth & Families, Children's Bureau, 2016). By one set of estimates using 2011 rates, 12.5% of children in the United States will experience a confirmed or substantiated case of maltreatment by age 18, which can include physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, or neglect (Wildeman et al., 2014). Abuse and neglect of children leads to serious consequences for individual victims (e.g., decreased economic well-being, mental health, and biological functioning; Currie & Widom, 2010; Heim, Shugart, Craighead, & Nemeroff, 2010; Silverman, Reinherz, & Giaconia, 1996), as well as an economic burden for society (e.g., medical and criminal justice costs, lost productivity; Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012).

Previous research indicates a strong link between experiences of maltreatment and aggression along with related conduct problems (Jaffee et al., 2005; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, & Taylor, 2004; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Polo-Tomas, & Taylor, 2007), although this

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association differs somewhat depending on the presence of environmental (Jaffee et al., 2007) or genetic (Jaffee et al., 2005) risk factors. For example, in a study of 1116 5-year-old British twin pairs, maltreatment increased the probability of conduct problems by only 2% for youth at low genetic risk, but 24% for youth at high genetic risk (Jaffee et al., 2005). Maltreatment was also more strongly associated with conduct problems in youth with added environmental stress (e.g., living in high crime neighborhoods, parents with substance use problems; Jaffee et al., 2007).

Youth with elevated conduct problems can be differentiated meaningfully into two subgroups: those without callous-unemotional traits, and those with callous-unemotional traits (or "with limited prosocial emotions," as noted in the DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013; see also Frick, 2006). Lack of remorse or guilt is a key component of the latter clinical presentation; for example, "I feel bad or guilty when I do something wrong" is an item with high discrimination on the Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (Hawes et al., 2014; Kimonis, Fanti, Goldweber, Marsee, & Frick, 2014; Ray, Frick, Thornton, & Steinberg, 2016), and in one study, girls with conduct disorder and limited prosocial emotions were more likely to lack guilt than girls with limited prosocial emotions who did not meet criteria for conduct disorder (Pardini, Stepp, Hipwell, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Loeber, 2012). In addition, lack of guilt is often strongly associated with delinquent behavior (Farrington & Loeber, 2000; Stuewig & McCloskey, 2005), and is theorized to be a marker of low empathy or abnormal conscience development (Frick, 2016).

However, principally due to limited research on the topic, the association between maltreatment and lack of guilt is not clear. Though many studies find a positive association between maltreatment and callousness (Byrd, Hawes, Loeber, & Pardini, 2016; Carlson, Oshri, & Kwon, 2015; Dackis, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2015; Kimonis, Fanti, Isoma, & Donoghue, 2013) at least one study has found negative or null associations (Krstic, Knight, & Robertson, 2015). Further, studies that found higher levels of callousness among maltreated children tended to rely on self-reports rather than substantiated official records of abuse, and did not specifically examine how maltreatment relates to different components of the broader callous-unemotional trait construct (Carlson et al., 2015; Kimonis et al., 2013).

Although our work examines the lack of guilt as an outcome, no previous research has examined associations between maltreatment and lack of guilt specifically; instead, work has focused on maltreatment and callous-unemotional traits, which include lack of guilt as well as a lack of empathy, concern, or emotion. Only two known studies used prospective designs with official maltreatment records assessed prior to callousness as an outcome (Byrd et al., 2016; Dackis et al., 2015). It is important to examine substantiated maltreatment reports, as retrospective self-report is vulnerable to biases (Hardt & Ruttner, 2004), and maltreatment events tend to occur early in life before long-term memory is fully functioning. For example, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau (2016) found that the highest rates of abuse occur when children are under one year of age, and that the rate of abuse for this age group is increasing relative to rates for other age groups. It is possible that maltreatment at such early ages disrupts the typical development of guilt and remorse and leads to maladaptive coping strategies, including pathologic adaptation (Ng-Mak, Salzinger, Feldman, & Stueve, 2004, 2002) and distancing coping (Boxer & Sloan-Power, 2013; Boxer, Sloan-Power, Mercado, & Schappell, 2012), that could lead to a callous-unemotional demeanor. In this way, youth become desensitized to violence and normalize their experiences with violence, becoming morally disengaged, less empathetic, and more likely to resort to aggressive behaviors (Boxer & Sloan-Power, 2013).

It is also unclear how the timing of maltreatment will be associated with lack of guilt later in development. Some studies have found that earlier maltreatment is more detrimental to youth's well-being (Fantuzzo, Perlman, & Dobbins, 2011; Keiley, Howe, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 2001; Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2001), while other studies have found that maltreatment in adolescence is a stronger predictor of adolescent outcomes than is maltreatment during childhood (Stewart, Livingston, & Dennison, 2008; Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001). The timing of maltreatment may have differential impacts depending on the outcome being studied; for example, research has found that early childhood maltreatment is associated with more symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicide ideation (Dunn, McLaughlin, Slopen, Rosand, & Smoller, 2013; Kaplow & Widom, 2007) and decreased academic achievement (Fantuzzo et al., 2011), and later maltreatment is associated with more externalizing behavior (Keiley et al., 2001). Early onset of verbal abuse and emotional neglect is also associated with maltreatment that is more frequent and more severe (Ney, Fung, & Wickett, 1994). No known previous study has examined specifically the timing of maltreatment events and callous-unemotional trait expression, or a lack of guilt in particular. Therefore, the role of timing of maltreatment events in the development of conduct problems and lack of guilt is a critical avenue for study.

Previous research indicates that chronic maltreatment is associated with poorer outcomes relative to isolated maltreatment events (Boxer & Sloan-Power, 2013; Jaffee & Kohn, 2011; Jonson-Reid, Kohl, & Drake, 2012; Manly et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 2001), potentially because chronic exposure to violence and inappropriate parenting might disrupt a youth's development of emotion regulation, coping strategies, and social skills (Boxer & Sloan-Power, 2013; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Éthier, Lemelin, & Lacharité, 2004). When assessing the association between maltreatment and outcomes, it is also important to consider the diversity of types of maltreatment to which youth might have been exposed. Previous studies indicate that there is a dose-response relationship, such that reporting victimization by multiple types of abuse is associated with worse outcomes than victimization by a single type of abuse (Boxer & Terranova, 2008; Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2009; Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2011; Higgins & McCabe, 2000). Specifically, previous research has found that the combination of physical neglect, physical abuse, and verbal abuse appear to have the greatest negative impact on youth (Ney et al., 1994), and that verbal abuse has a stronger impact on youth's behavior problems when youth also experience physical abuse (LeRoy, Mahoney, Boxer, Gullan, & Fang, 2014), although the current paper does not examine specific maltreatment combinations.

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