Published in final edited form as:

Crim Behav Ment Health. 2016 October ; 26(4): 304–314. doi:10.1002/cbm.2014.

Effects of Child Abuse, Adolescent Violence, Peer Approval, and Pro-Violence Attitudes on Intimate Partner Violence in Adulthood

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Abstract

Background—Children’s exposure to violence increases their risk for later victimization and perpetration of intimate partner violence (IPV). However, the relative influence of child abuse, adolescent violence, peer approval of violence, and pro-violence attitudes on later intimate partner violence is not well established.

Aims—Analyses focus on the prediction of adult IPV from variables measured in childhood and adolescence to establish the unique influence of earlier victimization and perpetration of violence, as well as other variables grounded in theory and empirical findings.

Methods—Data are from a longitudinal study that began in the 1970s with a sample of 457 preschool-aged children who were reassessed as adults. Outcomes of adult IPV victimization and perpetration types were regressed on predictors of parent-reported child abuse, officially recorded child maltreatment, adolescent victimization, violence perpetration, pro-violence attitudes, and peer approval of violence during adolescence, controlling for childhood SES, age in adolescence, and gender.

Results—Dating violence victimization and peer approval of dating violence in adolescence emerged as the unique predictors of IPV victimization and perpetration in adulthood. Official child maltreatment predicted IPV perpetration.

Conclusions—Results underscore the importance of prevention programs and strategies to disrupt the cycle of violence at its early stages, as well as interventions during adolescence targeting peer influences.

Introduction

Studies of violence and violent offending in adolescents and adults often refer to the “cycle of violence” that exists within families, a pattern in which children exposed to violence later become perpetrators of violence directed to their peers and partners (Widom 1989; Widom and Maxfield 2001; Herrenkohl, Sousa et al. 2008). Evidence of this pattern exists in a number of published studies and there are a variety of explanations for why and how this pattern unfolds, including those that emphasize social learning and attachment (Capaldi,

Knoble et al. 2012). In one study, Wolfe and colleagues (2001) found that boys, ages 14–19, with a history of maltreatment were significantly more likely than others their age to threaten and perpetrate physical abuse against their current or recent dating partners. In another study, Wekerle et al. (2009) reported a significant association between childhood emotional abuse and later dating violence perpetration among male youth involved with child protective services. Further, Milniak and Widom (2015) found that adults with documented histories of child maltreatment were more likely than their matched controls to perpetrate intimate partner violence in their late 20s.

Rates of self-reported and officially-recorded violent crime in adolescence and early adulthood, not limited to peers and partners, are also higher among children who were maltreated (Widom and Maxfield 2001). For example, Widom and Maxfield (2001) found that maltreated children committed two times as many offenses as their non-maltreated counterparts and were significantly more likely to be arrested for one or more violent crimes by their early 30s. The most likely to be arrested for these crimes were children who had been physically abused. In another study of the same dataset, Milniak and Widom (2015) found that maltreated children, as adults, were significantly more likely than matched controls to have an arrest for violence and also to perpetrate abuse against their own children.

Sadly, children who were abused are also at higher risk for later re-victimization (Foshee, Benefield et al. 2004; Maas, Fleming et al. 2010). In one study, Kim et al. (2009) found a significant association between having been physically and emotionally abused and later experiencing other forms of victimization, such as having been robbed, attacked with a weapon, or raped or sexually assaulted. In another study, Foshee et al. (2004) found that, for both boys and girls both, being hit by an adult, a form of physical abuse, significantly increased the likelihood of their becoming victims of dating violence later.

Perpetrating violence as an adolescent is both a consequences of having been abused and also a risk factor for later violence as an adult, including intimate partner violence, or IPV (Herrenkohl, Kosterman et al. 2007; Herrenkohl, Sousa et al. 2008; Capaldi, Knoble et al. 2012). In one study, Herrenkohl and colleagues (2007) showed that youth who perpetrated violence before age 18 were significantly more likely to perpetrate IPV at age 24. In their review of the literature, Capaldi and colleagues (2012) determined that violence, aggression, and other conduct problems, represent a “substantial risk factor for later IPV involvement” (p. 14).

Experiencing abuse and growing up in a violent home can have the effect of normalizing the behavior and also producing attitudes in children that favor violence in their own relationships (Ehrensaft, Cohen et al. 2003). During adolescence, positive attitudes and dispositions to violence are often reinforced through peer interactions and made even stronger when peers themselves experience and are prone to the use of aggression (Ehrensaft, Cohen et al. 2003). In Foshee et al.’s (2004) study, male adolescents who believed it was acceptable to hit their dating partners under certain circumstances were more likely to self-report serious dating violence victimization. Females with friends who had been victimized were also more likely to become victims of serious dating violence.

Although evidence regarding the overlap in experiences of violence, past and future, is relatively strong, it is not well understood how involvement in violence at different points in development (e.g., experience of child abuse in early childhood versus dating violence in adolescence) relate specifically to adulthood IPV. In this paper, we explore the unique prediction of adulthood IPV victimization and perpetration from childhood physical and emotional abuse and adolescent violence victimization and perpetration. We also include predictors of youth violence perpetration, violent attitudes, and peer approval of violence because these constructs are of interest theoretically, are linked to published findings in the literature (Capaldi, Knoble et al. 2012), and represent possible targets for violence prevention programs.

Methods

Data and Procedure

Data are from the Lehigh Longitudinal Study, which began in 1973 – 1974 as the evaluation portion of a child abuse and neglect treatment and prevention program in two counties of eastern Pennsylvania. Selection of the sample was accomplished over a 2-year period by referrals from two county child welfare agencies, of cases in which there was at least one abused or neglected child age 18 months to 6 years present in the home. The children served by child welfare agencies participated in one of several group settings (e.g., day care, Head Start). It was from these other settings that children from outside of the child welfare system were enrolled in the study. The original sample totals 457 children, and is composed of near equal numbers of males ($n = 248$) and females ($n = 209$). The racial and ethnic composition of the sample is consistent with the makeup of the two-county area from which participants were drawn: 5.3% ($n = 24$) Black or African American, 80.7% ($n = 369$) White, 11.2% ($n = 51$) more than one race, 1.5% ($n = 7$) other race and 1.3% ($n = 6$) unknown. About 61% of families were in poverty according to income-to-needs ratio in 1976 ($n = 276$).

The first “preschool” wave of the study took place in 1976 – 1977 when children recruited to the study were 18 months to 6 years of age. A second “school-age” assessment was conducted in 1980 – 1982 when the children were 9 years old on average. A third “adolescent” assessment of all youth participants ($N = 416$, 91% of the original sample) was conducted in 1990 – 1992 when they were 14 to 22 years old. An adult wave of the study was completed in 2010. The current study analyzed data from preschool, adolescent, and adult waves of the study. Details of the study design, sample, and various characteristics of the dataset can be found in other publications (Herrenkohl, Hong et al. 2013). Study procedures were approved by the Human Subjects Division at the University of Washington and the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at Lehigh University.

Variables

Child abuse—Child abuse was measured using two data sources: parent self-reports of their abusive disciplining practices and child welfare records. *Parent-reported physical and emotional child abuse* from the preschool wave of the study is based on the primary parents’ (mostly mothers’) reports of her and other caregivers’ use of physically (12 items) and emotionally (7 items) abusive disciplining practices. Questions asked of parents in the

preschool wave about their physical discipline referred to two time periods: (a) last three months and (b) prior to the last three months. Questions asked of mothers' about their (and others') emotionally abusive practices pertained only to the 3 months prior to the assessment.

Each practice was assessed for severity on a 5-point scale (5 = abusive, 4 = severely punishing, 3 = mildly punishing, 2 = mildly rewarding, 1 = highly rewarding) by a group of 41 child welfare workers. Practices used in the current analysis were all rated in the 4.0 to 5.0 (severely punishing to abusive) severity range. Scores of all raters were combined (averaged together) and then summed across 12 physically abusive practices (e.g., putting pepper in a child's mouth, slapping a child's face, hitting a child with a stick or paddle) and 8 emotionally abusive practices (e.g., taking meals away from a child, threatening to leave a child). The data for each abuse measure were scaled such that the measure reflects a child's overall exposure to abusive discipline across all possible caregivers.

A child's involvement with child welfare at the start of the study provides a measure of *official child maltreatment*. This variable distinguishes children involved with child welfare for alleged and substantiated child abuse and/or neglect ($n = 249$, 54.5%) from those not involved with child welfare ($n = 208$, 45.5%).

Adolescent violence victimization—Adolescent violence victimization was based on responses to four questions asked of youth about their past-year physical and sexual victimization. Questions on physical victimization pertain to whether youth had been injured or threatened with violence by someone other than a parent (mother or father) and whether they had been attacked with a weapon. Questions on sexual victimization pertain to whether youth felt pressured or pushed to do sexual things against their will and whether they had been sexually attacked or raped (attempts made but not completed were also considered evidence of a youth's having been victimized). Affirmative responses to these questions about victimization were followed by additional probing questions about the identity of the perpetrator. Responses that identified the perpetrator as a boyfriend or girlfriend were taken as evidence of *dating violence victimization* ($n = 25$, 6%). Responses that identified the perpetrator as someone other than a boyfriend or girlfriend were taken as evidence of *general victimization* ($n = 155$, 37.4%). Responses that indicated a youth had been victimized by both a dating partner and other person were coded as *both* forms of victimization ($n = 13$, 3.1%). These three categories of victimization were coded 1 or 0. Those who had not been victimized were coded 0 ($n = 221$, 53.4%).

Adolescent violence perpetration—Adolescent violence perpetration was measured by five items of a previously developed scale (Elliott 1987), which included having been involved in a gang fight; having hit or threatened to hit a supervisor or other employee; having hit another person with the idea of seriously hurting or killing that person; and having had or tried to have sexual relations with someone against their will. The variable was coded 1 ($n = 221$, 53.4%) for any offense and 0 ($n = 193$, 46.6%) for no offense in the past year.

Pro-violence attitudes—Pro-violence attitudes were measured in the adolescent wave of the study to reflect attitudes toward violence generally and toward dating violence in particular. Youth respondents indicated, on a 5-point scale (5 = very wrong to 1 = not at all wrong), how wrong they think it is “for someone to deliberately hit and injure their spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend” (indicative of favorable attitudes toward dating violence); or to “hit or threaten to hit someone without any reason” (indicative of favorable attitudes toward general violence). Each question was coded 1 (pro-violence attitude) or 0. A relative few ($n=19$, 4.6%) respondents were found to have favorable attitudes toward dating violence and a somewhat larger number ($n=63$, 15.4%) were found to have favorable attitudes toward general violence but not dating violence.

Peer approval of violence—Peer approval of violence was measured in the adolescent wave of the study and pertain to dating violence and general violence. Respondents answered, on a 5-point scale (5 = strongly disapprove to 1 = strongly approve), questions pertaining to how their friends would react if they “deliberately injured their spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend, e.g. hit, choked, or cut him/her” (peer approval for dating violence) or “hit or threatened to hit someone without any reason” (peer approval for general violence). Each question was coded 1 or 0 to reflect approval (or disapproval) of the behaviors. Ninety individuals (24.6%) believed their peers approved dating violence and 129 (35.2%) believed their peers approved general violence.

Adult intimate partner violence (IPV)—Adult intimate partner violence (IPV) was based on indicators of past-year victimization and perpetration of different types (physical, psychological, sexual, and acts resulting in physical injury) of violence derived from items of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus, Hamby et al. 1996). The subscale for physical violence is based on 12 items; psychological violence, 8 items; sexual violence, 7 items; and violence involving injuries, 6 items. All subscales of violence were dichotomized to indicate the presence or absence of each type of violence for the assessed period. In addition to the subscales for each IPV type, counts of all victimization types and perpetration types were added to the analysis.

Control variables—Control variables included gender, age, and childhood SES. *Male* was coded 1 and female 0. *Age* at the adolescent wave of the study and *childhood SES*, a standardized composite measure of parents’ occupational status, educational level, and family income, was also included.

Analysis

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for all study variables. Sample sizes shown in the table are not corrected for missing data. Primary analyses used Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation to address missing data. Analyses were conducted in Mplus 7.11 (Muthén and Muthén 1998–2012). Dichotomous measures of adult IPV victimization and perpetration were analyzed using logistic regressions. Counts of IPV victimization and perpetration were analyzed using Ordinary Least Squares regressions. Unstandardized coefficients (*bs*) are reported in Tables 2. Corresponding odds ratios and standard errors are available upon request.

Results

As shown in Table 1, a majority of the sample experienced one or more forms of psychological IPV ($n = 254$, 78.6%). Physical violence was perpetrated by 16.7% ($n = 54$) of the sample. Nearly 12% ($n = 34$, 11.8%) reported having perpetrated sexual IPV against a partner, and a slightly higher percentage (13.9%) were sexually victimized. The percentage of IPV victimization that resulted in physical injuries was low (5.3%). An even smaller percentage of the sample (3.4%) perpetrated IPV that resulted in physical injury. Overall, rates of IPV victimization and perpetration were similar for males and females except that females reported more physical perpetration (25.3% versus 10.6%) and sexual victimization (18.3% versus 10.0%) than males.

Parent-reported measures of physical and emotional child abuse were not significantly related to adult IPV victimization or perpetration, as shown in Table 2. Official child maltreatment was, however, associated with sexual IPV perpetration ($b = 1.21$, $p < .05$) and IPV perpetration resulting in physical injury ($b = 2.56$, $p < .05$). Official child maltreatment was also associated with the overall count of IPV perpetration types ($b = .22$, $p < .05$).

Dating violence victimization was associated with physical IPV victimization ($b = 1.22$, $p < .05$) and injury ($b = 2.12$, $p < .05$), as well as counts of IPV victimization and perpetration types ($b = .60$, $p < .01$; $b = .45$, $p < .05$, respectively). Adolescent victimization not involving a dating partner (i.e., general violence) was predictive of psychological IPV perpetration ($b = .72$, $p < .05$) and the count of IPV victimization types ($b = .22$, $p < .05$).

Pro-violence attitudes related to dating and other forms of violence were not significantly related to later IPV victimization or perpetration, nor was youth violence perpetration, after accounting for other variables in the analysis. However, peer approval of violence related to dating violence was associated with psychological IPV victimization ($b = 1.76$, $p < .001$), and the count of IPV victimization types ($b = .33$, $p < .01$). Peer approval of dating violence was also related to psychological IPV perpetration ($b = 1.79$, $p < .01$), physical IPV perpetration ($b = .84$, $p < .05$), and to the count of IPV perpetration types ($b = .36$, $p < .01$).

Age, treated as a control, was inversely related to IPV victimization resulting in physical injury ($b = -.42$, $p < .05$). Males were less likely than females to be sexually victimized as an adult ($b = -1.07$, $p < .01$) and to perpetrate physical IPV ($b = -.74$, $p < .05$). Childhood SES was not significantly associated with adult IPV victimization or perpetration in these models.

Discussion

Results of this study show that the strongest prediction of adult IPV victimization and perpetration is from earlier forms of victimization and peer approval of dating violence in adolescence. While findings are generally in keeping with earlier reports of a developmental link between earlier and later forms of violence (Widom 1989; Widom and Maxfield 2001; Capaldi, Knoble et al. 2012), they also raise the possibility that the type and timing of a child's exposure to violence will influence IPV risk.

Strengths of the study include a longitudinal design, multiple data sources on violence across development, and measures of child abuse, dating violence, and IPV. Limitations include a relatively homogeneous sample and attention to only certain predictors of IPV as an outcome (Capaldi, Knoble et al. 2012). It is also not known whether there was consistency in dating over the course of adolescence and adulthood is important for understanding the cycle of violence perspective and for estimating the continuity in violent relationships. Findings add to knowledge of dating violence and IPV risk processes, which is important for primary and secondary prevention efforts (Herrenkohl 2011).

Acknowledgments

Funds for this project were provided by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (RO1 HD049767) and the National Institute of Justice (2012-IJ-CX-0023). The content of this paper is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the funding agencies.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (listwise)

	<i>N</i>	Yes <i>n</i> (%)	No <i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i> (<i>s.d.</i>)
Child Abuse				
Physical/Emotional abuse at preschool	450	–	–	6.84 (5.68)
Child welfare involvement	457	249 (45.5)	208 (54.5)	–
Adolescent Victimization				
	414			
No violence		221 (53.4)	–	
General violence only		155 (37.4)	–	
Dating violence only		25 (6.0)	–	
Both (General and dating violence)		13 (3.1)	–	
Pro-violence Attitude				
General violence	410	63 (15.4)	347 (84.6)	
Dating violence	410	19 (4.6)	391 (95.4)	
Peer approval				
General Violence	366	129 (35.2)	237 (64.8)	
Dating Romantic partner violence	366	90 (24.6)	276 (75.4)	
Adolescent violent perpetration				
	414	221 (53.4)	193 (46.6)	
IPV Victimization (Adult)				
Counts	323	–	–	1.11 (.88)
Psychological	323	243 (75.2)	80 (24.8)	
Physical	323	53 (16.4)	270 (83.6)	
Sexual	323	45 (13.9)	278 (86.1)	–
Injury	323	17 (5.3)	306 (94.7)	–
IPV Perpetration (Adult)				
Counts	323	–	–	1.11 (.82)
Psychological	323	254 (78.6)	69 (21.4)	–
Physical	323	54 (16.7)	269 (83.3)	–
Sexual	323	38 (11.8)	285 (88.2)	–
Injury	323	11 (3.4)	312 (96.6)	–
Control Variables				
Childhood SES	457	–	–	0 (3.3)
Age at adolescence	416			18.2 (1.8)
Male	457	248 (54.3)	209 (45.7)	

IPV: Intimate Partner Violence

Table 2

Prediction of adult IPV perpetration and victimization by child abuse and adolescent victimization and perpetration, and pro-violence attitudes and peer approval

	IPV Victimization					IPV Perpetration				
	Count ^a	Psychological	Physical	Sexual	Injury	Count ^a	Psychological	Physical	Sexual	Injury
Control Variables										
Childhood SES	.02	.09	.04	.01	-.04	.02	.06	-.02	.09	.00
Age	-.05	-.10	-.02	-.13	-.42 *	-.03	-.11	-.20	.08	-.08
Male	-.07	.23	.14	-1.07 **	-.09	-.01	.23	-.74 *	.33	.34
Child Abuse										
P-R physical/emotional child abuse	.00	-.02	.01	.05	-.00	.01	-.02	.03	.04	.05
Official child maltreatment	.17	.32	.38	.21	1.25	.22 *	.13	.33	1.21 *	2.56 *
Adolescent Victimization										
General violence victimization only	.22 *	.66	.35	.24	.86	.06	.72 *	.03	-.33	-.83
Dating violence victimization only	.60 **	1.49	1.22 *	.67	2.12 *	.45 *	2.11	.80	.65	.73
Both general and dating violence vict	-.05	-.57	.62	-6.78	2.18	-.48	-1.21	-.09	-11.27	-1.68
Pro-violence Attitudes										
Attitudes toward general violence	-.01	-.28	-.06	.54	-.68	.03	-.34	.42	.29	-.03
Attitudes toward dating violence	.24	-.01	.80	.45	.74	.39	.44	1.07	1.12	-1.26
Peer Approval										
Approval of general violence	-.17	-.00	-.63	-.56	-.42	-.00	.36	-.26	-.42	.75
Approval of dating violence	.33 **	1.76 ***	.69	-.39	.23	.36 **	1.79 **	.84 *	.19	-.10
Youth Violence Perpetration	.17	.18	.51	.52	.59	.10	.26	.02	.66	-.37
R-squared	.10 **	.21 **	.11 *	.38	.32 **	.10 **	.27 **	.15 **	.55	.39 *

^aNumbers of violence types for victimization and perpetration were analyzed as continuous variables ranging from 0 to 4. Each type of violence in IPV was analyzed as binary variable.

^bCoefficients are unstandardized; odds ratios and standard errors are available upon request.

* $p < .05$,

** $p < .01$,

100 > *d'*

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