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Gender Differences in Child Maltreatment: Child Sexual and Physical Abuse

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Abstract

More than 2 million investigations of suspected maltreatment were opened by child protective services (CPS) in 2018 (Child Trend, 2019), and in 91.7% of cases, parents of the children or stepchild in question were the primary offenders (Child Trend, 2019). Child maltreatment is broken down into two categories: abuse and neglect. Abuse can be further broken down into child physical abuse (CPA), child sexual abuse (CSA), and child emotional abuse (CEA: Park, 2020; Behl, Conyngham, & May, 2003). In considering risk for perpetration of abuse, some notable gender differences have been identified in past research. Females are more likely to be perpetrators of CPA than males, and males as more likely to perpetrate CSA (Behl et al., 2003). Recent research verifies that males are overwhelming more likely to perpetrate CSA, with girls as the primary victims (Behl et al., 2003, Mileva, Goshev, & Alexandrov, 2020; Park, 2020). Past research also places an emphasis on stepfathers as perpetrators of CSA, yet this may be an overrepresentation due to mis-education regarding CSA amongst children (Gerke, Rassenhofer, Witt, Sachser, & Fegert, 2019; Mileva, et al., 2020). Females perpetrate CPA at higher rates but are less likely to severely injure the child than males. Male perpetrators of CPA are generally more violent than female perpetrators. In general, fathers are more likely to favor authoritarian punishment and to use corporal punishment. Fathers' high rates of corporal punishment may be a result of lack of experience in resolving child conflict due to lower levels of parental involvement.

Understanding Child Maltreatment

General Overview

In 1974, Child Protective Services (CPS) was formed in the United States (US) to focus on the protection of children experiencing child abuse and or neglect. More than 2 million investigations were opened by CPS in 2018 (Child Trend, 2019), and in 91.7% of cases, parents of the children or stepchild in question were the primary offenders (Child Trend, 2019).

Although rates of child maltreatment have remained steady from 2014 to 2018, over 400,000 first time victims were reported in 2018 (Child Trend, 2019, pp. 31). Child maltreatment, acts of commission or omission by an adult that results in the harm or the potential of harm to a child (0-18 years of age), can take multiple different forms, including: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect (Scott, Bromfield, Richardson, Lamont, & Meredith, 2014; Behl, Conyngham, & May, 2003). Child maltreatment may result in lifelong physical impairments, mental health impairments and other possible negative outcomes such as the death of the child (World Health Organization, 2016).

Child maltreatment is difficult to study due to its private nature, many inconsistencies in definitions of neglect and maltreatment, and a complex array of contributors (World Health Organization, 2016). The statistics for maltreatment that are generally available focus on documented cases and do not account for child maltreatment in unreported cases (Scott et al., 2014). Thus, most statistics provide an imperfect estimate of the total number of children abused or neglected. However, the information that is available is typically based on reports from CPS, courts, police documentation, and other governmental departments involved in child protection. These forms of documentation do provide relevant information on characteristics of the

perpetrators and victims, as well as the type or types of abuse in cases where such maltreatment is identified and documented.

No single risk factor or set of factors directly leads to maltreatment (Park, 2020; Mulder, Kuiper, Stams, & Assink, 2018); instead, many factors may interdependently increase the probability of maltreatment. Potential factors that increase for the risk for maltreatment include past history of abuse, the age of the mother at the time of childbirth, mental health challenges, the stress levels of the perpetrator, lack of self-control, and more (Emery, Nguyen, & Kim, 2014). Any of these factors alone can increase the risk for maltreatment, but it is common for more than one risk factor to co-occur in cases in which maltreatment is identified. For example, parents who experience significant life stressors are more likely to engage in child neglect (Emery, et al., 2014). Significant life stressors are also associated with higher risk for parent mental health challenges (Maybery, Ling, Szakacs & Reupert, 2005), and mental health challenges themselves contribute to risk for perpetration of maltreatment (Maybery et al., 2005; Emery et al., 2014). In another example, research by Emery and colleagues found that parents who had both low self-control and smaller social support networks were also more likely to engage in child maltreatment (2014). One of the many factors that can influence risk for abuse perpetration, as well as the nature of the abuse, is parent or caregiver gender.

Maltreatment

Child maltreatment is typically broken down into two categories: abuse and neglect. Abuse can be further broken down into child physical abuse (CPA), child sexual abuse (CSA), and child emotional abuse (CEA: Park, 2020; Behl et al., 2003). For the purpose of this paper, neglect will not be examined due to its categorical differences from abuse. Among the remaining types of maltreatment, CPA is one of the most common forms of abuse, with CSA following.

CPA can consist of violence such as striking or the use of a weapon to inflict physical injury onto the child, and it is non-accidental (Behl, et al., 2003; Park, 2020; Scott et al., 2014; Wolfe, 1985). Finkelhor defines CSA as sexual contact with a child that meets at least one of the following criteria: sexual acts are carried out against the child by use of manipulation, sexual acts are carried out when the abuser is in a position of authority or in a care-taking position over the child, and sexual acts are carried out when there is a large age gap between partners (1999). CEA typically co-occurs with CPA, CSA, and neglect, making it difficult to ascertain the effects of CEA independent of other types of maltreatment (Park, 2020; Scott et al., 2014). Because of this confounding of CEA with other types of maltreatment, this paper will focus on primarily CPA and CSA, with recognition that CEA is likely to be a co-occurring event in many of these cases.

Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse, CSA, encompasses sexually abusive acts against children; these acts may include rape, sexual assault, and incest (Murray et al., 2014). Sexual action against minors is also considered CSA even when a sexual act is incomplete, or there is no sexual contact or exploitation of the child (i.e., child pornography: Murray et al., 2014; Alzoubi et al., 2018). It is difficult to know how many children are sexually abused because CSA is often hidden and/or not reported by victims until later in life (Finkelhor & Baron, 1986). For this reason, occurrence and features of CSA are typically assessed using surveys focused on historical experiences.

Gender Differences in Victims

A CSA meta-analysis by Behl found that girls are significantly more likely to be victims of CSA than boys (Behl, et al., 2002), and this pattern has also been confirmed on other literature (Murry et al., 2014; Scott, et al., 2014). For example, in a study conducted in Sweden, 65% of girls experienced CSA compared to 23% of boys. Recent meta-analytic data estimate that about

seven to eight percent of boys, and eighteen to twenty percent of girls, experience CSA globally (Russell, Higgins, & Posso, 2020). In a prevalence study by Mileva and colleagues based on 10,139 forensic medical examinations performed in Sofia, Bulgaria, 261 examinations indicated sexual violence (Mileva, Goshev, & Alexandrov, 2020), and 36% of the 261 examinations showed CSA. In 87% of the examinations where there was evidence of CSA, the victims were girls, while in only 13% of the examinations, the victims were boys. Researchers in the US have reported that approximately one in twenty boys are sexually abused, while one in five girls are sexually abused (Finkelhor and Baron, 1986; Murry et al., 2014).

Research on gender of victim as a function of perpetrator gender is very limited (Gerke, Rassenhofer, Witt, Sachser, & Fegert, 2019). However, it appears that males are more likely to sexually abuse girls than they are to sexually abuse boys (Margolin and Craft, 1989; Mileva, et al., 2020). While female perpetration appears to be uncommon, female perpetrators may tend to be more likely sexually abuse boys than girls (Mileva, et al., 2020). Mileva and colleagues questioned 2516 individuals about prevalence of CSA and their experiences with CSA in Bulgaria. Of the 2516 individuals surveyed, 10.5% reported experiences of CSA. Victims of male perpetrators were primarily girls, but victims of female perpetrators were split almost in half: 53.8% girls and 46.2% boys (Mileva, et al., 2020). In sum, the CSA literature indicates that girls are overwhelmingly more likely to be victims of CSA than boys.

Gender Differences of Perpetrator

A large body of research demonstrates that males are more likely to commit sexual abuse and be convicted of sexual abuse than females (Behl et al., 2003; Cui, N., et al., 2016, Chung & Su, 2009; Locke & Newcomb, 2004; Park, 2020, Mulder et al., 2018; Park, 2020; Finkelhor, 1999). In part, this may reflect the fact that females are more likely to report being a victim of

CSA than men, and most of female reports present males as the perpetrator (Finkelhor, 1999). However, when broken down by caregiver type and gender, Margolin and Craft (1989) also found that males were more likely to commit CSA compared to females across all caregiver roles. In fact, males were eight times more than females to be convicted of CSA when data were collected across a variety of role such as, siblings, babysitters, parents, family members, and strangers (Margolin & Craft, 1989). These patterns have led Finkelhor and Baron to identify gender as a risk factor for CSA, with males more likely to be perpetrators (1986). Based on identified patterns to date, estimates are that for every one female perpetrator there are thirteen male perpetrators (Scott et al., 2014; Margolin & Craft, 1989; Finkelhor, 1999; Finkelhor & Baron, 1986).

Fathers vs. Stepfathers

Stepchildren are at higher risk for experiencing CSA than children who live with two parents with whom they are biologically related (Finkelhor & Baron, 1986; Margolin & Craft, 1989; Murry, Nguyen & Cohen, 2014; Nobes, Panagiotaki, Malvaso, & Klevens, 2020). This pattern has been coined the Cinderella effect, highlighting the fact that stepchildren are more likely to be preyed upon because they are not genetically related to the caregiver, and therefore the caregiver does not feel the same kinship ties (Finkelhor & Baron, 1986; Margolin & Craft, 1989; Nobes et al., 2020). Greenberg and colleagues tested whether males who sexually abused girls in their care were more likely to be stepfathers or biological fathers (2005). In their sample of 143 men convicted of sexual abuse, biological fathers were significantly less likely to be aroused by their children than stepfathers.

However, it is possible that the numbers found in CSA literature are skewed by an increased likelihood of detecting and/or prosecuting stepfathers for CSA (Margolin & Craft,

1989; Murry et al., 2014; Nobes et al., 2020). Margolin and Craft argue that stepfathers are not necessarily more likely to sexually abuse stepchildren, but rather, are more likely to be convicted of sexual abuse compared to biological fathers (1989). Children also may not identify their fathers as perpetrators of sexual abuse because they have been miseducated about what behaviors compose sexual abuse (Tremblay & Begin, 2000). Tremblay and Begin note that children are taught to be wary of strangers and that there are certain parts of their body that should not be touched. However, inappropriate touching is often not precluded for parents, and a child may not understand that what they are experiencing is CSA because the rules they were taught did not apply to their parents. Related to this, primary caregivers are most likely to hold educational discussions of CSA, and often this responsibility falls on mothers (Alzoubi, Ali, Flah, & Alnatour, 2018). This education may be lacking because there is a known gap in caregiver knowledge of what CSA entails (Tremblay & Begin, 2000; Alzoubi et al., 2018). In Jordan, for example, mothers often focus on CSA in the form of rape (Alzoubi et al., 2018). Similarly, mothers in other countries have been found to lack awareness of other forms of sexual abuse aside from rape and molestation (Tremblay & Begin, 2000). Alzoubi and colleagues illustrate that when mothers are explicitly informed and educated about how CSA is defined, CSA is more likely to be prevented (2018).

Related to limited understanding of CSA in the general population, surveys targeting CSA history have found that individuals who are victims of CSA are often not aware that the experiences were CSA until later in life (Tremblay & Begin, 2000; Alzoubi et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2014). This is consistent with the view that children may be improperly educated on what CSA entails. Sexual abuse education describing perpetrators as adults who are strangers and not caregivers or a known people may be a particular problem (Scott et al., 2014). Although some

research suggests that strangers are more likely to be perpetrators of CSA, family members and known individuals are common perpetrators as well (Scott et al., 2014). Additionally, the likely increased opportunity for fathers (vs strangers) to engage in CSA combined with a failure of children to accurately label acts with fathers as CSA (due to misinformation, as previously noted), means that father perpetration may be significantly under-detected.

Child Physical Abuse

Child physical abuse, CPA, can be defined as non-accidental physical injury that is the result of commission by an individual (Wolfe, 1985). CPA is typically composed of blunt force used against a child under the age of 18, and it may result in head injuries, bite marks, bruises, and more (Park, 2020). Weapons may also be used as a form of inflicting violence against children (Park, 2020). Depending on the force used, CPA may result in lifelong physical or mental health impairments and/or other negative outcomes such as the death of the child (World Health Organization, 2016). Of children reported to be maltreated, 18 percent are physically abused (Brown, Yilanli, & Rabbitt, 2020).

Gender Difference in Perpetrators

Research focusing on the prevalence of gender differences among perpetrators demonstrates that mothers and females are generally more likely than fathers or males to commit CPA (Behl et al., 2003; Cui et al., 2016, Chung & Su, 2009; Locke & Newcomb, 2004; Park, 2020, Mulder et al., 2018). A literature meta-analysis by Behl and colleagues confirmed this pattern of females being significantly more likely to be CPA perpetrators (2003). Consistent with this pattern, adults who experienced child maltreatment report higher rates of child maltreatment from their mothers than from their fathers (Muller, 1995). This is particularly true when CPA is involved.

However, this pattern of mothers appearing to show higher rates of abuse may be a methodological anomaly, since when accounting to the absence of fathers in the home, fathers are equally likely, or even more likely, to be the perpetrators of CPA (Nobes & Smith, 2000). In fact, Nobes and Smith demonstrated that children were less likely to live in homes with their fathers, and after controlling for father absence, children living with both parents were 50% more likely to receive physical abuse from their father (Nobes & Smith, 2000). Hence, the lower rate of CPA from fathers may reflect their absence from the home as opposed to an actual decreased risk for CPA perpetration.

Severity of Injury

When males commit CPA, the form of abuse is often more violent than that of females (Park, 2020). Males are more likely to strike the victim, while females are more likely to pinch or bite the victim, so the severity of the injury is significantly greater with male perpetration, and males are more likely to kill a child than women (Park, 2020). West and colleagues compared violent tendencies in fathers and mothers who were responsible for the death of their child (2009). They found that fathers were more likely to kill their children using more violent approaches (West, Friedman, & Resnick, 2009). Mothers were less likely than fathers to implement violence as a method of homicide, and they were more likely to commit homicide unintentionally (West et al., 2009). In a study in Australia, fathers were also more likely to kill their children as the result of use of physically aggressive responding than mothers (Scott et al., 2014).

Corporal Punishment

The use of corporal punishment is more common among males than females (Park, 2020, Cui et al, 2016). This reflects, in part, a tendency for males and fathers to use a more

authoritative form of discipline than to females. In contrast, females engage in higher rates of emotional abuse or neglect (Cui et al, 2016; Chuang & Su, 2009). This pattern is also evident in other cultures such as China, where fathers have been shown to be more likely than mothers to use corporal punishment when punishing their sons (Cui et al, 2016). When comparing Chinese and Canadian parenting styles, Chinese mothers are more likely to use authoritarian forms of punishment than Canadian mothers (Chung & Su, 2009). In spite of this, both Chinese fathers and Canadian fathers appear to favor authoritarian punishment. While it is possible to be authoritarian without engaging in corporal punishment, authoritarian parenting approaches are been strongly linked to corporal punishment (Chung & Su, 2009). Thus, when fathers favor authoritarian parenting styles, they are generally more inclined to use corporal punishment as a form of discipline, increasing the risk for CPA.

Data indicate that mothers are more likely to be primary caretakers and thus, they tend to spend more time in parenting contexts (Nobes & Smith, 2000; Park, 2020). In traditional families, the mothers also typically play a care taking role and an emotional support role, while the father is often responsible for discipline and providing income. While changing times have seen reduced adherence to these traditional gender-based roles, fathers continue to show lower levels of parental involvement (Park, 2020; Mulder et al., 2018). Thus, mothers have more opportunity to practice disciplining their children and to learn what forms of discipline work best for their child. While mothers are generally at higher risk for CPA when they are stressed than when they are not (Nobes & Smith, 2000), due to high parental involvement, mothers under stress may be less likely to physically abuse their child than typically less experienced fathers under stress (Mulder et al., 2018). Additionally, fathers who spend less time with their children are more likely to lack experience in the home resolving conflict and are likely to experience

more stress when disciplining their children. As noted previously, males are also more likely to use forms of corporal punishment to discipline (Muller, 1999; Cui et al., 2020; Park, 2020). This combination of inexperience and preference for authoritarian discipline, may explain why fathers are more likely to engage in corporal punishment (Muller, 1999; Cui et al., 2020; Park, 2020).

Gender Differences in Victims

Unlike CSA, one gender is not necessarily more likely to be a victim of CPA, and same-sex perpetration is more likely to occur (Cui et al., 2016). For example, in China fathers were more likely to punish their sons than their daughters using CPA (Cui et al., 2016). A meta-analysis by Muller illustrated that fathers were more likely to punish their sons physically, and mothers were more likely to punish their daughters physically, compared to the opposite patterns (1995). The reason for this is unclear and there is limited research that explores why the matched gender for the perpetrator and victim increases the risk for CPA.

Conclusion and Summary

Child sexual and physical abuse are two common forms of child maltreatment with many factors, including gender of victim and perpetrator, contributing to their risk. Based on this review of the literature, several interesting gender-based patterns are apparent with CSA and CPA. With regard to gender of the victims, girls are more commonly victims of CSA than boys but with CPA, a child is more commonly a victim if they share the same gender as the perpetrator. In terms of perpetrators, females are more likely to be convicted of physical abuse, and in child maltreatment literature, they are more likely to be described as as the main perpetrators of CPA. Males are more likely to commit sexual abuse and be convicted of CSA than females. However, in both CPA and CSA, it could be possible that the numbers misrepresent real patterns or gender-based risks due to issues of underreporting or reduced

opportunities for abuse. In spite of this, fathers and stepfathers are more likely to be perpetrators of CSA than mothers. Fathers are also more likely to use more violence and more extreme violence when punishing their children than mothers.

Child maltreatment research often focuses on specific types of maltreatment and the impact of maltreatment on victims; however, understanding risk factors that contribute to maltreatment can lead to better detection of groups at high risk and facilitate intervention. While this literature review highlights some important gender-based factors that influence CSA and CPA, most maltreatment occurs in private settings and many cases where maltreatment occurs are never recorded or prosecuted. As a result, some of these patterns may be artifacts of problems like underreporting or under detection. For example, the literature regards females as the most common perpetrators of CPA but often does not account for fatherless homes or total parental involvement, which could lead to overestimates of relative risk for abuse perpetration for mothers compared to fathers in parenting roles. To improve intervention and to reduce risk for maltreatment, it is important that the literature is reflective of the collective population and not just subsets of convicted groups. Data collection from both mothers and fathers who are suspected of maltreatment, convicted mothers and fathers, and mothers and fathers not convicted nor suspected of maltreatment should be included in data samples. While the privacy of home settings and limitations of self-report pose difficulties, the ability to compare patterns across these groups could prove useful in evaluating the degree to which our current understanding of CPA and CSA gender-based patterns are generalizable versus skewed by sampling and detection-based biases.

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