The aetiology of the physical and sexual abuse of children: towards a comprehensive theory of prevention and protection

Christine Jones, Julie Taylor, Jon Brown and Zain Kurdi
Overview of the research

Research Questions:

1. What is currently known about the causes and conditions associated with the perpetration of physical and sexual abuse against children?

2. What disciplinary approaches and theoretical orientations are employed by researchers to understand and explain the aetiology of physical and sexual abuse?

3. To what extent are these approaches compatible when applied to a cross-cutting prevention agenda?
Method: Literature Reviews

- Review of CSA and CPA literature

- Two elements: theory and evidence
  - Searches of computerised databases: ASSIA, Medline, Cinahl plus, IBSS, PsycInfo, PsycArticles
  - Hand searches of *Child Abuse & Neglect, Child Abuse Review, Child Maltreatment*, and *Trauma, Violence and Abuse*
  - Google scholar search
  - Reference list searches
Defining terms and recognising limitations

- Focus on CSA and CPA rather than child maltreatment generally
- Broad definitions of CSA and CPA used as a starting point
- Inclusive approach to capture nuances, commonalities and differences
- Focus on ‘integrated theories’
- Commissioned by NSPCC: a UK context
Integrated theories of CSA

• Finkelhor's (1984) Four Precondition Model of CSA
• Hall and Hirschman’s (1992) Quadripartite Model of sexual aggression against children
• Ward and Siegert's (2002) Pathways Model of CSA

• Marshall and Barbaree’s (1990) Integrated Theory of the Etiology of sexual offending
• Ward and Beech’s (2006) Integrated Theory of Sexual Offending (ITSO)
Integrated theories of CPA

- Gil’s (1970) multidimensional model of CPA
- Coohey and Braun’s (1997) Integrated Framework for Understanding CPA
Theorising CPA

- Family violence
- Violence against women and girls
- Child maltreatment
Some reflections on trajectories of CSA/CPA theory

- ‘Integrated frameworks’ less developed in CPA than CSA
- Recurrent themes:
  - (Bio)psychosocial explanations proliferated
  - Ecological systems approach highly influential
    (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1995; Belsky 1980)
  - Person–situation interactions
- Continued importance of psychological theories
- CSA/CPA integrated theories remain PARTIAL
Key limitations within integrated theories

- The decentred child
- The universal child
- The dislocated child
Key limitation: the decentred child

- Mainly theories of being or becoming a ‘perpetrator’ rather than theories of ‘perpetration’
- Child is absent, marginal, ambiguous
- Aetiology: causes = blame
- Focuses away from victim
- Underplays complexity of dynamics of abuse
- Person – situation theories more dynamic
  - feature perpetrator, victim, capable guardian
  - but latter two positioned as situational factors
Key limitation: the universal child

- Even within the Criminological theory the victim is sketchily drawn
  - ageless, genderless, disembodied, a generic victim
- All acknowledge that empirical research tells us differences are part of the dynamics of abuse
  - Girls between 2 and 5 times more at risk of sexual violence than boys (Stoltenborgh 2011, Finkelhor 2014)
  - Lgb boys and girls experiencing higher levels of CSA and CPA (Saewyc et al 2006)
  - Disabled children 3 to 4 times more at risk of abuse (Sullivan and Knutson 2000; Kvam 2004)
- But not fully accounted for at theoretical level
- Inattention to intersectionality
Key limitation: the dislocated child

- Social factors acknowledged but understood differently
  - interpersonal, cultural, structural factors
- Target for intervention intimate relationships, cultural attitudes or structural inequalities
- Emphasis still on socio-cultural context of perpetrator
- Little attention to structural equalities and role of institutions in maintaining victimhood (e.g. access to justice)
- Feminist theory – surprisingly few attempts to integrate
- Need to integrate critical theories re patriarchy, disablism, heterosexism/heteronormativity
Implications for prevention and protection

- Strengthening community capacity
- Tackling institutional oppression
- Promoting prosocial behaviours in perpetrators
- Building resilience of potential victims/perps
- Mobilising capable guardians

Individual level interventions

Situational interventions

Structural level interventions
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Contact:  Chris Jones - c.a.jones@ed.ac.uk

Thank you for listening