

Recent Advances and New Challenges in Child Maltreatment Research, Practice, and Policy: Previewing the Issues

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Few issues are of such grave importance to society and to the science and practice of psychology as child maltreatment. Our goal in editing this issue of JSI was to inform scientists across various sub-fields of psychology about the most current knowledge in the field of child maltreatment, broadly defined. The authors of the articles have gone further, pushing past the edge of current knowledge and setting aggressive agendas for future empirical and policy-relevant work. We believe that the result will be enriched future research, practice, policy, and law, and in turn, the increased well-being of children and their families.

Child maltreatment is one of the greatest social problems yet to be adequately addressed by social science. By its very nature, child maltreatment, broadly defined, is a cross- and multi-disciplinary issue, involving topics relevant to virtually all subdisciplines of psychology (e.g., community, developmental, clinical, cognitive, social, and biopsychology), and to other disciplines, such as social work,

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We thank the American Psychological Association's Division 37 (Child, Youth, and Family Services) and the Division 37 Section on Child Maltreatment, for their sponsorship of this journal issue. We also thank the *Journal of Social Issues* (JSI) General Editor, Rick Hoyle, for being so enthusiastic about a JSI issue on the topic of child maltreatment and for his kind support and useful guidance as we edited this issue. Finally, we thank all the authors of the articles for their hard work, and the many anonymous reviewers for giving their time and expertise to ensure that the contributions were the best they could be.

sociology, anthropology, law, public policy, and pediatric medicine. Psychologists in the field of child maltreatment are concerned with conducting research that leads to understanding, treating, and preventing this societal problem, and with applying that research to relevant practice, policy, and law.

Obviously then, the perfect venue for a journal issue focused on the newest psychological research within the field of child maltreatment and its applications is the *Journal of Social Issues (JSI)*, a venerable forum that focuses on research related to social problems. Its broad audience comprises scientists and practitioners interested in children and youth, child development, abuse and trauma, neurobiological bases of mental health, social policy and law, prevention and community mental health, and clinical practice. Of particular importance, *JSI* has a history of promoting psychological science related to child abuse. In fact, many believe that Gail Goodman's 1984 issue of *JSI* on children and the law quite literally marks the beginning of the modern scientific study of children's eyewitness testimony.

In the current issue, which is sponsored by the American Psychological Association's (APA) Division 37: Child, Youth, and Family Services and its Section on Child Maltreatment, we highlight the importance of studying child maltreatment in all its forms and the relevance of child maltreatment to many different arenas of psychology and public policy. Many of the most well-respected scholars in the field of child maltreatment have joined forces to discuss the newest research and theory regarding an exceptionally wide range of "hot" issues: national trends in the incidence of child maltreatment, physiological consequences of child maltreatment, treatment for maltreatment victims, risks and opportunities associated with foster care placement following maltreatment, prevention and intervention strategies, cultural influences on the perpetration and treatment of child maltreatment, children's competencies in various abuse-related legal contexts and their eyewitness testimony abilities, and challenges and opportunities faced by psychologists working on all forms of child maltreatment within a multidisciplinary context. In each article, the authors present the best research to date on their particular topic; discuss the practical implications of that research for treatment, prevention, and public policy; identify gaps in current knowledge; and outline an aggressive agenda for future research. Thus, all of the contributions push past the edge of current knowledge on child maltreatment and highlight future directions for empirical and policy-relevant work.

The Timeliness and Need for This Issue on Child Maltreatment

The initial seeds for this issue of *JSI* were planted at the 2002 convention of the APA. Specifically, we organized a Presidential Symposium for the Division 37 Section on Child Maltreatment (Bottoms was then President of the Section and now Past President of Division 37, and Quas was then Program Chair for the Section, and later on the Executive Committees of both the Section and the

Division). The overwhelmingly positive response to our symposium made it clear that the topic was of considerable interest to a range of scientists and practitioners, and that a journal issue expanding on the themes in the symposium was timely and needed for many reasons. First, consider the enormity of the problem and its importance to society at large and psychology as a discipline: There are over one million substantiated reports of child maltreatment each year, and those reports represent only a sliver of the actual number of abusive incidents that children suffer (Bottoms, Rudnicki, & Epstein, in press; Pipe et al., in press). Although thankfully many children are remarkably resilient, others suffer from the many potentially devastating consequences of maltreatment, including cognitive and neurological deficits, psychological problems, heightened susceptibility to revictimization, drug use, and delinquency, to name a few. Without effective prevention, treatment, intervention, and policy, maltreatment will continue, and maltreated children will grow up to become troubled adults, affecting society throughout generations. Thus, there are few issues of such grave practical importance to society, and simultaneously so directly relevant to the science and practice of psychology.

Second, such a journal issue is needed because it has great potential to encourage better research, practice, law, and policy. The body of scientific research designed to understand and prevent child maltreatment in the first place and to intervene and ameliorate negative consequences is growing within our discipline. Researchers are beginning to address the complex and multifaceted nature of the problem of child maltreatment by, for example, integrating multidisciplinary perspectives into their theories and by using innovative paradigms in their methodology (e.g., functional magnetic resonance imaging) to identify neurological as well as psychological consequences of maltreatment. In turn, more sophisticated knowledge is being generated, knowledge that can inspire new research and influence clinical practice and public policy. But even while these great advances are being made, far more is needed. As a discipline, we can do much better, especially if psychologists from various subfields learn more about what each other is doing. Our goal in editing this issue of *JSI* is to inform scientists across various subfields of psychology about the most current knowledge in the discipline and the limits of that knowledge. We want to encourage psychologists to think creatively about the issues from psychological, sociological, medical, and legal perspectives. This will surely enrich future research efforts, and in turn, be of considerable benefit.

Finally, this issue is needed because the time has come for a collection of articles that will bring balance within the current sociopolitical context of child maltreatment research. Beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, controversial and false child maltreatment allegations, while being the minority of actual cases, took center stage and became the focal point of many high-profile stories and books in the public press (e.g., Eberly & Eberly, 1993; Pendergrast, 1995). Such stories feed a backlash against the societal recognition of actual child maltreatment. For example, some legal decisions in cases involving alleged sexual

abuse, especially daycare cases involving bizarre claims that happened more than a decade ago, have been overturned because of inappropriately leading forensic interview tactics used with suspected victims (State v. Michaels, 1993). Of course, it is critically important to ensure that suspected child victims are not exposed to misleading interviews that encourage false reports, which are a travesty of justice (Bottoms & Davis, 1997). But publicity associated with these inappropriately handled, vastly unrepresentative, and long-ago cases has spawned growing skepticism regarding child abuse cases generally, even those in which children are not questioned inappropriately and those not involving sexual abuse claims (Lyon, 2002). Controversies within the field of psychology have also helped feed a backlash that draws attention from real child abuse. For example, Rind, Tromovitch, and Bauserman's (1998) meta-analysis of the long-term consequences of adult-child sexual contact led to a highly publicized and politicized national debate about the harmfulness of and definition of child sexual abuse (for discussion, see Ondersma et al., 2001). It also led ultimately to bitter debates within our discipline about the politics of publishing controversial papers, a debate showcased in a (2002) issue of the *American Psychologist* by Newcombe and McCarty. To the extent that such stories and events monopolize the attention of laypeople, psychologists, and policy makers, attention is directed away from the need to determine how to identify, prevent, and treat real child abuse and neglect of many forms. Thus, the time has come for a journal issue devoted to understanding actual child maltreatment and its effects. We believe this should help restore balance to recent dialogues, by moving topics in desperate need of continued research from the shadow of distracting controversy toward increased attention, with the result being enriched future research, practice, and policy, and in turn, the increased well-being of children and their families.

The Individual Contributions

Our journal issue opens with a contribution by Chaffin, who describes why and how psychologists must move from an emphasis on sexual abuse to an emphasis on other more common forms of child abuse, namely physical abuse and neglect. He provides a keen analysis of new issues posed by physical abuse and neglect, as opposed to sexual abuse, and describes the new roles that psychologists must take to address those issues. His analysis is rich in terms of both historical perspective and recognition of the ways in which child maltreatment research benefits from, and is challenged by, its multidisciplinary nature. The great breadth of his analysis sets the stage perfectly for the other articles in the issue, as his article previews many of the topics that other authors address in depth.

Second, Finkelhor and Jones discuss the provocative research finding that, over the past decade, both reported and substantiated cases of child maltreatment

have leveled off, and in the case of sexual abuse, even decreased. They describe many of the reasons that have been proposed to explain this positive phenomenon in terms of maltreatment reports. They then highlight the most plausible explanations and describe how these explanations may work together or interact to affect maltreatment occurrences. They close by discussing the implications of these trends for continued research concerning causes of maltreatment and for societal intervention and prevention efforts.

Third, Watts-English, Fortson, Gibler, and De Bellis provide an overview of their and others' exciting, cutting-edge research concerning neurobiological effects of early maltreatment experiences, effects that can have adverse mental and physical health consequences across the lifespan. Their comprehensive review of the biopsychological literature is an impressive primer for any psychologist wishing to learn about the neurological effects of stress exposure on children as a result of child maltreatment. The education provided by this article should allow researchers untrained in biopsychology to consider incorporating biopsychological perspectives into their theories and sophisticated new methods into their research designs. By showcasing the benefits of this research, Watts-English and colleagues have provided a strong argument for increased attention to biologically based research on the effects of child maltreatment.

In the fourth contribution, Cohen, Mannarino, Murray, and Igelman discuss their and others' newest findings regarding the best (i.e., evidence-based) psychological interventions for child victims of maltreatment and trauma. On the one hand, their review will be very useful to clinicians and others who need to understand and use the best available treatments for their clients. On the other hand, the lack of research and knowledge that their review illustrates provides a blueprint for the next decade of treatment research. Such an analysis is sorely needed, in a field where information about best practices is sometimes piecemeal and disjointed, and where the public hears too often about practices that are divorced from psychological science.

In the fifth article, attachment theory experts Dozier and her colleagues Peloso, Lindhiem, Gordon, Manni, Sepulveda, Ackerman, Bernier, and Levine tackle the critical topic of intervention by testing an intervention targeting maltreated children's adaptation to foster care. Specifically, for many children, the aftermath of child maltreatment is family disruption and placement in the foster care system. These authors first describe the different ways in which children are involved in foster care, the emotional and developmentally relevant risks of foster care placement, and potential policies and practices that could limit those risks. Then, they present results of their program of research illustrating that educational intervention programs for children and foster parents can attenuate children's stress levels. Their intervention holds the promise to reduce some of the dysregulation in physiological systems resulting from maltreatment exposure.

Sixth, Elliott and Urquiza, noted experts in the study of the cultural context of child maltreatment, provide one of the few comprehensive reviews available on cultural issues central to the etiology, treatment, and prevention of child maltreatment and neglect. They review studies of ethnic and cultural differences in the types and prevalence of child maltreatment and discuss some of the limitations in the generalizability of these studies. They then provide a set of concrete recommendations for new, exciting studies that directly focus on the role of culture in identification, reporting, and consequences of maltreatment. Overall, Elliott and Urquiza call for a new research agenda that will move the field beyond a simple acknowledgment of cultural differences, to a more sophisticated understanding that will aid in identification, prevention, and treatment efforts.

Many child victims of maltreatment must enter the legal system. The seventh and eighth papers address issues that arise when children become involved in the court system, especially as eyewitnesses. Inclusion of a piece by Goodman is particularly appropriate because, as mentioned previously, many credit her *JSI* issue on children and the law with starting the modern field of children's eyewitness testimony research over two decades ago. Goodman's article is an interesting, somewhat personal retrospective, in which she traces the field of children's eyewitness testimony research beginning in the 1980s, through the 1990s, and into the 2000s. She provides an insightful analysis of ways in which the scientific study of child maltreatment and children's testimony has been shaped by legal and political trends, shifting societal values and controversies, and even by the values and beliefs of the fields' leading researchers. She also explains the ways in which the resulting research has affected national and international public policies and laws governing children's evidence.

Goodman's historical review is a prelude to the article by Lyon and Saywitz that describes several key directions for future research concerning children's memory and eyewitness capabilities. Notably, Lyon and Saywitz highlight the need to expand scientific research from focusing relatively narrowly on children's suggestibility and child sexual abuse allegations to focusing on the much wider range of experiences children may encounter, on the multiple sources of pressures children may face to discuss (and not discuss) their experiences, and on methods of improving children's narratives. If the child witness research agenda expands in the ways suggested by these authors, the resulting findings face have the potential to impact a substantially larger group of children than has heretofore been the case.

Finally, this journal issue closes with two of the best minds in the field, Toth and Cicchetti, providing an in-depth commentary on the state of the field of child maltreatment research generally as well as on the findings presented in the other articles specifically. They discuss not only the range of consequences that may ensue following maltreatment, but also the need for policy and practice to take into account multiple societal, cultural, and developmental factors when evaluating these consequences. They conclude their article by rightfully

demanding that the next wave of child maltreatment research, much of which is outlined in the preceding articles, has, as a primary goal, the improvement of the lives of child victims of maltreatment and of children at risk for maltreatment. With this goal, direct translation of research into practice will be made possible.

Common Themes

Several important themes weave throughout all of the articles in this issue. First, there is attention to all forms of child maltreatment, not only child sexual abuse. Although child sexual abuse has dominated much of the field's research agenda over the past decade, it is not the most common form of child maltreatment. The field needs to respond to this fact by placing more emphasis on research on all forms of child maltreatment, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and rarely studied forms of maltreatment, such as witnessing traumas like domestic violence. Readers will learn of the importance (and the challenges) of studying all forms of child maltreatment through Chaffin's consideration of research on sexual abuse compared to neglect and physical abuse, and from Finkelhor and Jones' systematic examination of the incidence of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. As another example, Cohen and colleagues highlight treatment not only for child victims of physical and sexual abuse, but also for children who experience neglect and emotional abuse and those who have been exposed to domestic and community violence, all of which constitute forms of maltreatment in a broad sense. Also, Dozier considers intervention and prevention strategies to improve the lives of foster care children who have suffered from and who are at risk for maltreatment of all forms, especially neglect.

Second, throughout this issue, authors pay careful attention to questions of procedure and methodology, and they emphasize the importance of embracing new research techniques. For example, Finkelhor and Jones provide a thoughtful analysis of the benefits and limitations of using large epidemiological data sets to test theories regarding factors influencing the incidence of child maltreatment, and how such data sets should be improved for future studies. Watts-English and colleagues address the previously overlooked, but arguably most cutting-edge of all child maltreatment research topics: advances in cognitive neuroscience and biopsychology in maltreated samples. They provide a sophisticated review of the various methods for psychobiological investigations and the findings revealed by such novel investigations. Elliot and Urquiza caution that study designs and methodologies (as well as theories) should take cultural context into account.

The third theme that binds the articles together is multidisciplinary. Many authors are experts from fields other than psychology, including law, medicine, psychiatry, and sociology. Finkelhor, for example, is a sociologist. Cohen has her

doctorate in medicine. Lyon is both a legal scholar and developmental psychologist. De Bellis has degrees in medicine and public health. Elliott has degrees in psychology and public health. Although most contributors are psychologists, there is also variation among their subdisciplinary backgrounds. Some are social psychologists (e.g., Dozier, Bottoms), while others are developmental (e.g., Quas, Goodman, Saywitz) and clinical (e.g., Cicchetti, Toth, Mannarino) psychologists. This disciplinary diversity means that articles include the best of methods and theories from the various intellectual realms, increasing the potential of the issue to move the field of child maltreatment forward in novel directions. This theme is most prominent in Chaffin's article, where he specifically discusses the benefits of multi- and cross-disciplinary work, outlining the broad types of knowledge and methodological approaches necessary for studying physical abuse and neglect. He suggests that community and social psychologists (and developmental psychologists with expertise in those areas) might be better equipped to handle cases of neglect and physical abuse than traditionally trained psychotherapists, and that in any case, there should be close ties between psychology and social work/child welfare. Elliot and Urquiza call for crossing disciplinary boundaries to locate theories that will help in understanding cultural aspects of maltreatment. Watts-English and colleagues clearly make the case that medicine and neuroscience must be brought to bear in understanding the impact of child maltreatment. And in their contributions, Lyon and Saywitz and Goodman highlight the need for close interactions between the disciplines of law and psychology when maltreatment victims enter the legal system.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, is the overarching theme of identifying the applicability and practical significance of scientific research on child maltreatment. All authors identify public policy and legal implications where appropriate. For example, Finkelhor and Jones discuss the implications of their findings for prevention efforts; Dozier and Cohen and their colleagues urge public policies, clinical practices, and services that intervene, ameliorate the effects of, and prevent future child maltreatment; and Lyon and Saywitz and Goodman focus on the need for psychologists to conduct research that will help the courts in understanding children's abilities in a wide set of legal contexts. Finally, Toth and Cicchetti comment that scientists in the field of child maltreatment must take current practice into consideration when designing their research, and perhaps more important, that scientists need to push their research agendas forward by translating their findings for practice and policy.

Conclusion

In closing, this issue of *JSI* demonstrates how new research findings can provide practitioners with information that can support treatment efforts, spawn

better future programs of research, and directly aid new prevention efforts and better social policy and law. This information will benefit psychologists from across the historical subdivisions of our discipline (cognitive, neurobiological, clinical, community, social) who study diverse aspects of child maltreatment (definition, etiology, treatment, prevention, policy), advancing our collective understanding of child maltreatment.

On behalf of APA Division 37 (Child, Youth, and Family Services), and its section on maltreatment, which has sponsored this issue, we challenge the readers of this issue who are researchers to answer the calls made by the authors of these articles for more and smarter research. We challenge the readers who are primary care providers to answer the calls for better therapeutic practices and mental health services for children in need. We challenge the readers who are scientists in the public eye to answer the calls to use the research to influence policy and law. If this happens, this *Journal of Social Issues* will benefit our society's maltreated children and their families through enriched research, policy, and practice.

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