

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

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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

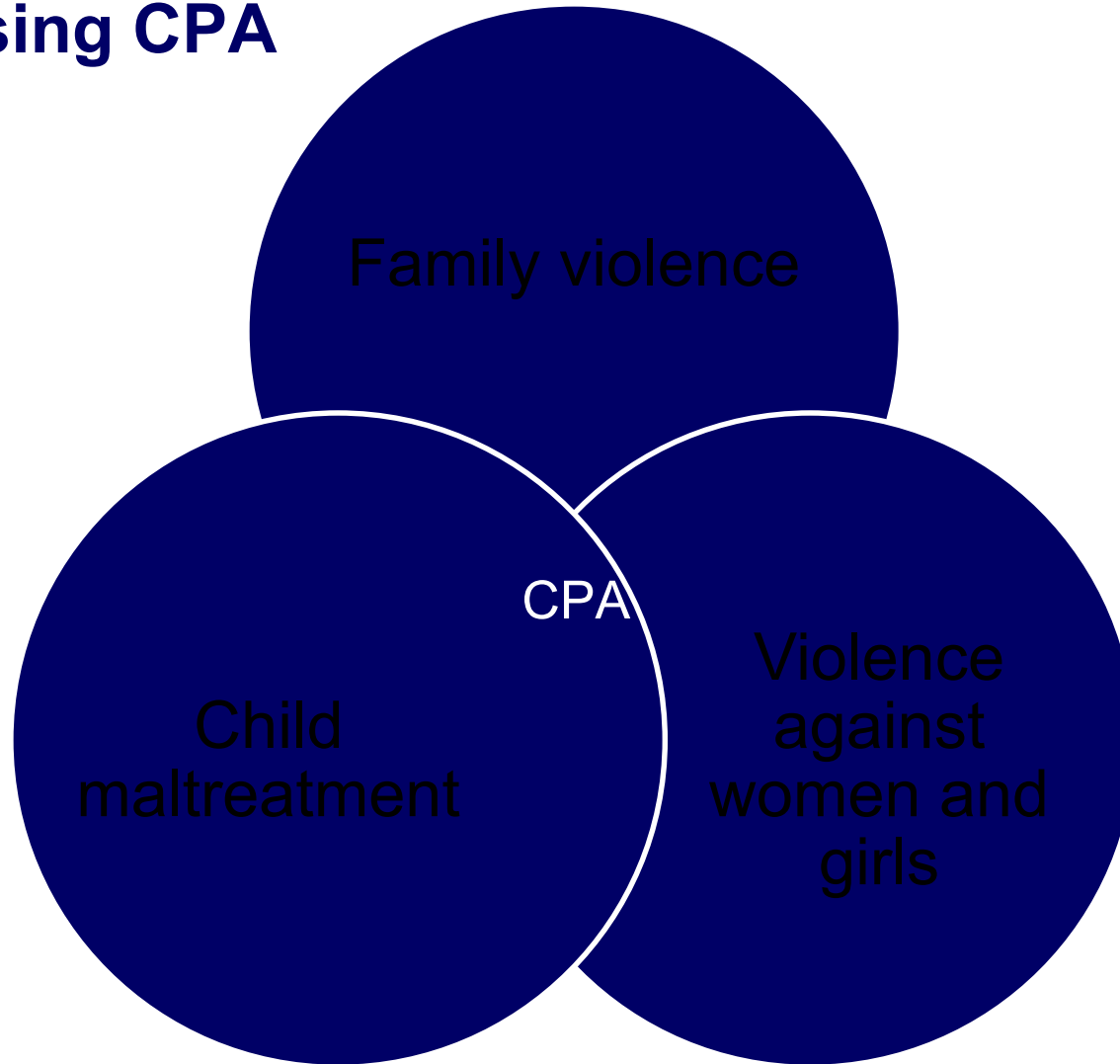
- **Finkelhor's (1984) Four Precondition Model of CSA**
- **Hall and Hirschman's (1992) Quadripartite Model of sexual aggression against children**
- **Ward and Siegert's (2002) Pathways Model of CSA**
- **Smallbone, Marshall and Wortley's (2008) New Integrated Theory of CSA**

- **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



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

Structural level interventions



Individual level interventions

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Thank you for listening