Commentary: Umbrella synthesis of meta-analyses on child maltreatment antecedents and interventions – a commentary on van IJzendoorn and colleagues (2020)

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This well-written, informative article by van IJzendoorn and colleagues provides new findings from an umbrella review; a 'grand synthesis' as the authors describe it, on the antecedents of child maltreatment and prevention and intervention programs aimed at reducing child abuse and neglect. In their review, the authors combine and systematically compare results from several thousand studies included in earlier meta-analyses on these topics published over a 5-year period from 2014 to 2018. Their synthesis accounts for the quality and coverage of earlier reviews by coding and then analyzing such factors as the number and types of studies that were meta-analyzed; the number of participants represented in those prior analyses; and the extent to which the researchers who conducted a meta-analysis accounted for publication bias.

Few readers will take issue with the intent behind this effort: to broadly assess and distill the evidence on issues of such grave concern and consequence to the general public, as well as those in direct service and policy-making roles whose primary responsibility is to ensure the security of children (Lonne, Higgins, Scott, & Herrenkohl, 2019). The need for this particular review is indeed strengthened by the increasing size, scope, and complexity of the literature on child maltreatment and interventions that now span a period of more than 50 years (Krugman, 2018). To consumers of this work—even those of us familiar with the content from our own research and practice in the field—there are benefits. By way of these reviews, we can acquire a fuller and more nuanced and objective understanding of research conducted around the world. The effect is to bring into sharper view what we know, what we thought we knew, and what we have yet to learn as a field. As important, large scale or 'high-level' reviews like this can be very motivating to us researchers whose next steps are often guided by what assessors of the science identify as major gaps or inconsistencies in published findings.

As a consumer *and* researcher, I admit to finding the results of this review instructive but also a bit intuitive, at least when it comes to antecedents.

Patterns in the data are in many ways those we see in our own data, such that parents' histories of child maltreatment increase the likelihood of their potential for abusing and neglecting their children years later. Parental experiences of intimate partner violence, insecure attachments, and low SES were also identified in this umbrella review as significant antecedents, with effect sizes in the .3 to .5 range. These are considered 'moderate' effects, according to Cohen's conventions. However, other variables that are presumed to increase the risk of child maltreatment, such as parents' elevated reactivity to stress, did not surface as significant predictors in this report, whether because the connection is truly not there or because too few studies on the topic currently exist.

An important side note to the authors' findings in this section of the report centers on a pivotal and increasingly consequential question of how one is to know when data from primary sources are actually comparable, as is generally required for meta-analyses. Pertinent to this question are considerations of measurement and whether studies based on official records of child maltreatment are similar enough to those based on self-reports. With respect to intergenerational patterns, the authors found that officially recorded child maltreatment in offspring was more strongly related than self-reports to parents' own experiences of child maltreatment when they were young. Yet, whether parental exposure to maltreatment was measured using official records or self-reports did not matter for the strength of the intergenerational effect. Thus, a seemingly important take-home message from these results is that measurement matters, and that when data based on official records and self-reports are analyzed and interpreted as if they are the same, conclusions can be misguided. The same can be said of primary source studies (and reviews of the literature; or even reviews of reviews of the literature) that sometimes carelessly combine data from cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, which also differ and can produce results that are sometimes markedly different (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). That was not the case in this review.

Results pertaining to prevention and intervention programs are also instructive, but the evidence in this area is generally weaker. To this point, and in comparison to findings presented earlier in the

report, the authors state, 'The umbrella synthesis shows the power of the antecedents of child maltreatment and at the same time the 'power failure' of the interventions to prevent or decrease child abuse and neglect in the next generation' (p. 283). As their statement implies, the findings on prevention and intervention are largely disappointing. The authors did find that parenting programs and certain risk reduction strategies, such as counseling expecting mothers on the harms of using alcohol during pregnancy, may have some benefits, but others like home visiting have yet to show reliable effects. Interventions with high-risk groups carried out in pediatric and emergency room settings further lack empirical support and are thus not recommended.

Suffice it to say that these results are both a bit troubling and alarming, if taken at face value. Rather than be deterred, however, we in the field might use these findings as a call to action; a charge to do more to advance well-designed prevention programs and to accelerate the pace by which new findings (and evidence-based approaches) make their way to the front lines. The findings might also serve to weed out poorly conceptualized and under-theorized programs, and to more rapidly bring promising programs to scale, particularly those designed to combat the most pernicious and chronic risk factors for child maltreatment, such as prior abuse and poverty (Klevens & Metzler, 2019).

In other publications, my colleagues and I have written about the promise and power of universal and blended prevention models, which work at a population level to reduce risk and enhance protection, while also engaging in cross-system and collaborative work to increase access to coordinated services for children and families in greatest need (Herrenkohl, Higgins, Merrick, & Leeb, 2015; Herrenkohl, Leeb, & Higgins, 2016; Lonne et al., 2019). Although efforts reflected in the data compiled by van IJzendoorn and colleagues have not produced the changes any of us desire, one can presume that this is in part a function of the scope and scale of programs featured in the report, not the promise of prevention. With large and sustained investments in evidence-based, universal and blended prevention programs and policies focused on parenting and maternal health, for example (Sanders, Higgins, & Prinz, 2017), measurable successes at the community, state, national, and even international levels will be more readily observed and easily captured in outcome data.

In their conclusion, the authors argue that sizeable gaps in research remain in the literature and that specific topics, such as differential susceptibility and neurobiological mechanisms of risk transmission, demand more attention than they now receive in order to guide prevention and intervention programs in the future. They also refer to the importance of resilience and of studies that help to explain continuity and discontinuity in pathways linking early adversity to later life outcomes. These ideas will resonate with content experts who study the cycle of violence in distressed families and know of its destruction (Widom & Maxfield, 2001).

To understand how resilience unfolds requires a comprehensive assessment of intersecting variables rooted in genetics and biology, as well as in the social environment. Although not as yet evident from intervention research, social support and other like factors do appear in etiological studies on child maltreatment as important sources of resilience (Bellis et al., 2017), indicating the need for further exploration of the ways that positive and nurturing relationships and environments can be placed at the center of multi-level and systems-oriented prevention strategies (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2014) that also have potential to lessen racial disparities and inequities in access and service quality (Herrenkohl, 2019).

That socioeconomic status emerged as an antecedent of child maltreatment is the basis for the authors' recommendations for prevention programs tied to household income, such as cash transfer programs in low-income areas. Universal programs and policies aimed at increasing access to health and social services, reducing the strain of poverty, and broadening the engagement of early childhood education are, in their views and mine, core components of a broad and comprehensive policy-level change strategy aimed at eradicating all forms of family violence, including child maltreatment (Klevens & Metzler, 2019).

In conclusion, it is evident that there is much we know, but even more we do not know and must learn, about the most salient antecedents of child maltreatment and prevention and intervention programs. This comprehensive and robust compilation of research brings clarity to a growing and diverse body of scholarship that is anything but consistent in its findings or recommendations. By drawing attention to research and gaps in the literature, the authors have done a huge service to the field. The work is timely and persuasive, offering useful guidance and calling on all of us who study and practice in areas related to child maltreatment and prevention to do even more to end the cycle of violence and to engage in programs and policies that are locally impactful and globally relevant.

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