

Violence against children by stepparents

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Abstract

A wide range of child and caregiver characteristics, including parental psychopathology, parents' childhood experiences of abuse, parenting stress, child age, parent age, child disabilities, socio-cultural background, and caregiver's relationship to the child, have been reported to contribute to increased risk of violence directed against children. Although there is a dearth of research into violence against children in stepfamilies, some studies have indicated that stepparents are more likely to abuse children compared with genetic parents. Stepparents also have been found to pose a significantly greater risk of using excessive violence, which can subsequently lead to the death of a child. The risk of violence against stepchildren has also been found to be significantly elevated with the presence of stepparent's genetic offspring. One possible explanation for increased violence in stepfamilies is that stepparents do not want to invest feelings and resources in children who do not carry copies of their genes. Sexual violence by stepparents, on the other hand, can be explained by the lack of exposure to a learning mechanism termed 'incest aversion', which refers to negative sexual imprinting during a critical period of early childhood to avoid inbreeding. Yet another possibility is that people who divorce are more likely to do so due to aggressive impulses which can play a part in relationship termination. When they remarry, those aggressive impulses can be directed against stepchildren. However, stepfamilies are also reported to experience more stressors associated with family violence, including alcohol abuse, child's behavioral problems, adverse contextual backgrounds, and weaker social networks. This suggests that the stepfamily structure may not be a risk factor of violence against children *per se*. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a description of the problem of violence against children by stepparents, discuss the extent of the phenomenon and its possible theoretical explanations, critically review empirical research assessing violence against children by stepmothers and stepfathers, as well as suggest directions for future research.

Key Words: Violence against children; Child physical abuse; Child sexual abuse; Stepparents; Stepfamily structure

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1. Introduction: Description of the problem

Violence against children is a major public health issue with serious negative short- and long-term consequences including, but not limited to, antisocial behavior, aggression, violence, educational underachievement, depression, and self-destructive behavior (Debowska & Boduszek, 2017; Debowska, Boduszek, Sherretts, Willmott, & Jones, 2018; Debowska, Willmott, Boduszek, & Jones, 2017; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, & Taylor, 2004; Jones, Trudinger, & Crawford, 2004; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; Lahey, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2003; Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Shaw & De Jong, 2012; Vachon, Krueger, Rogosch, & Cicchetti, 2015). It appears that violence and abuse experienced in the home is especially detrimental to children's wellbeing because it instigates feelings of powerlessness and betrayal (Debowska et al., 2018; Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). It has been reported that each year, 1% of children in the population come to the attention of child protection services (Gilbert et al., 2009a). However, violence against children is a crime that is likely to be underreported (Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005). Indeed, research indicates that per year between 4 and 16% of children experience physical abuse, 10% experience psychological abuse, between 1 and 15% are neglected, and 6% experience sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1994; Gilbert et al., 2009b; Matthews & Walsh, 2004). In an attempt to prevent violence against children, empirical research has focused on recognizing risk factors for victimization and perpetration. One of the factors explored in such research has been the family structure. More specifically, studies have explored the possibility that certain types of families, such as stepfamilies and single-parent families, may pose a greater risk of violence to children compared with intact families with both biological parents.

Apart from scientific evidence, stepparents are commonly thought of as being more punitive and abusive than genetic parents. The negative portrayal of stepmothers can be traced back at least to traditional children's fairy tales, such as Cinderella and Hansel and Gretel, where stepmothers were often villains of the stories. Indeed, the phenomenon of higher incidence of child maltreatment among non-natal offspring is sometimes referred to as the "Cinderella effect" (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000, 2008; Daly & Wilson, 2007). Stepfathers, in turn, although spared in children's literature, have been presented in a negative light in traditional adult literature, including William Shakespeare's plays and Charles Dickens' novels. The villainization of stepparents is perpetuated by the popular media (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000,

2008). Although some studies have investigated lethal and nonlethal violence perpetrated by stepparents, most research on violence against children has not distinguished between genetic parents and stepparents. In addition, it is difficult to isolate stepparent status as a risk factor for violence against children because stepfamilies face a particularly high volume of problems and challenges which may serve as contributing factors to violence against children. Regarding stepfamily status as a potential risk factor for violence against children may represent a relic from a time when such families were thought of as inferior and were therefore stigmatized (Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Facing such stigma could result in stress, subsequently leading to violence against non-genetic children as a means of releasing stress and anger. Although research in the area is bristling with difficulties, several theoretical and conceptual frameworks motivate researchers to ask and investigate new research questions.

2. Theoretical perspectives on violence against children by stepparents

In order to explain the origins of violence against children at the hands of non-natal caregivers, social, evolutionary, and biological theories have been proposed. Many of those theories explain only the occurrence of either child physical or sexual abuse, stressing the importance of considering different forms of maltreatment as separate phenomena with distinct sets of risk factors (Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984).

2.1. Social-evolutionary theory

According to the social-evolutionary theory, sometimes also referred to as socio-biological theory, stepchildren are overrepresented as victims of neglect as well as physical and sexual violence due to stepparents' lack of concern for their non-genetic offspring's wellbeing (Daly & Wilson, 1985, 1994). Within this perspective, neglect and child physical abuse, which may eventually lead to the death of a child, are interpreted as byproducts of evolved strategies that motivate reduced parental investment, including time, energy, care, and finances, in non-genetic offspring who do not carry copies of stepparents' genes. As such, abusive behavior against non-genetic children increases the stepparent's reproductive fitness and the chances of survival of one's genetic offspring, especially under difficult economic and social conditions (Adler-Baeder, 2006; Archer, 2013; Hamilton, 1964; Trivers, 1972). This theory predicts that both stepmothers and stepfathers will neglect, desert, or refuse investing in non-genetic charges. However, this theory offers no explanation as to why parents also neglect, physically abuse, and sometimes kill their genetically related offspring, except for

situations where resources are scarce and the survival of one, usually the stronger child, is favored over the survival of the genetically inferior child. Furthermore, if physical abuse of a stepchild results in injuries but not in death, then the demand on parental resources is likely to be increased. Therefore, if stepparents aim for reducing investment in stepchildren, physical abuse should be avoided (Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984).

The prediction of increased risk of sexual abuse among non-genetic children has been explained by the incest aversion mechanism, also referred to as the Westermarck effect, wherein the close proximity of individuals living together from early childhood (approximately between 2 to 6 years of age) is a kinship cue used to activate sexual intercourse aversion between them. Since non-genetic caregivers are less likely to be present in the child's life during the critical period, the negative imprinting would be less likely to take place, rendering sexual relations with a stepparent more probable (Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984; Holanda Júnior, 2017; van den Berghe, 1983). This approach also emphasizes that incest is undesirable from biological and evolutionary perspectives, rather than for cultural and social reasons solely, because offspring from first-degree consanguineous parents are significantly more likely to be affected by various diseases, including autosomal dominant diseases, limb abnormalities, chromosomal disorders, and cognitive disabilities than children of non-consanguineous parents. Stillbirths and child deaths are also significantly higher among consanguineous parents (by approximately 80%) than among non-consanguineous parents (Shawky, Elsayed, Zaki, El-Din, & Kamal, 2013). Nevertheless, there is limited research evidence in support of this perspective in a situation where one partner is a child and the other is an adult. In a recent empirical investigation using survey methodology among a sample of genetically related (45% of the sample) and sociolegal (55%) fathers and daughters ($N = 632$) from Canada and the United States, the viability of the Westermarck effect as a mechanism that accounts for incest avoidance for fathers was not supported. Contrary to the hypothesis, physical proximity was not found to be negatively associated with incest propensity. However, feelings of disgust were negatively associated with incest propensity, revealing a proximate mechanism facilitating incest avoidance among fathers (Pullman, Babchishin, & Seto, 2019).

2.2. Normative theory

Normative theory has been proposed to explain the higher rates of sexual abuse by stepfathers. The theory holds that stepfathers, in particular, as non-genetic relatives to their

stepchildren, are subject to weaker normative taboos against incest than genetic fathers. Compounded by the position of authority held by caregivers, stepchildren may be sexually exploited more often than genetically related children. The normative theory of sexual abuse by stepparents is congruent with the social-evolutionary theory presented above, which posits that incest taboos are critical to avoiding genetic degradation. However, the normative approach is not entirely biologically based. Ideas about acceptability of inbreeding are subject to considerable variation across societies, indicating a cultural origin. Thornhill (1991) outlines several reasons regarding cultural variation of incest norms and rules. For instance, one reason is that taboos tend to be stronger in societies where married females live with their in-laws in order to dissuade tempted males from mating with a married female. A demonstrative example is found from anthropological reports on the Tallensi clan in Ghana, among whom sexual relations between siblings were merely frowned upon, whereas sexual relations with the wife of a fellow clan member were severely punished (Goody, 1956). In this instance, taboo against affairs of this kind places paternal certainty and solidarity of a family home as more important than sexual conquests. There also exist potentially outlying societies such as Ptolemaic Egypt, in which marriages between consanguineous siblings seemed to be relatively commonplace, perhaps normalized by incestuous relationships found in their religious stories and demonstrated by the marital tendencies of their rulers (Hopkins, 1980). Empirical evidence in support of the normative theory, however, is scant. Research is needed to investigate whether different taboos exist against sexual relations between genetically and non-genetically related parents and children.

2.3. Stress theory

Another theoretical framework for studying violence against children in stepfamilies is stress theory. Giles-Sims and Finkelhor (1984) argue that stepfamilies experience higher levels of conflict and stress than intact families. Stressors associated with divorce and stepfamily formation include moving, economic strain, and loss of parental support (Amato, 2000). Inability to cope with such life stressors may lead directly to family violence, including child abuse, or indirectly through, for example, substance abuse. Stress theory, unlike the above-presented frameworks, helps to explain the association between child abuse and low family income, large household size, and family disruption (Adler-Baeder, 2006; Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984). However, this perspective would indicate that stepfamily structure is not a risk factor for child abuse *per se*. Rather, stepfamilies create an environment more conducive

to child abuse due to increased occurrence of stressors associated with family violence, including alcohol abuse, child's behavioral problems, adverse contextual backgrounds, and weaker social networks.

2.4. Resource theory

Resource theory holds that the more economic and social resources an individual has at their disposal, the more power and authority they are granted in the society. Such individuals do not need to resort to violence to obtain what they want. In contrast, people with limited resources do not possess the power and authority they may desire or expect, which can result in violent behavior as a means of compensating for the lack of other assets. The family, similarly to other social units, is a power system, rendering the resource theory applicable in this context (Goode, 1971). Importantly, this theory may be helpful in understanding physical violence perpetrated specifically by stepparents. In particular, non-genetic caregivers who enter a family unit may be denied the authority they want due to lack of resources to earn it. Violence perpetrated against stepchildren, therefore, can be used to attain dominance in the context of the new family situation when other means are lacking (Azar, 1991; Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984). Resource theory has received modest support in relation to self-reported child protection services (CPS) involvement. Adjusting for annual income, participation in welfare programs, and food insecurity, attenuate the link between maternal conjugal status and CPS involvement (Berger, Paxson, & Waldfogel, 2009). Recently, Cools and Kotsadam (2017) studied the impact of resources in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV), which, similarly to child abuse, is a form of family violence. The researchers utilized data from a sample of 580,000 women from 30 different countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to the normative theory, women with few resources (such as wealth, employment, and education) should be at an increased risk of abuse. Similarly, men with fewer resources are likely to be more abusive. The study findings provided little evidence in favor of this view. In particular, although household wealth was correlated with less abuse, the relationship was non-linear. Strikingly, more education and employment were associated with more abuse. In considering that IPV frequently co-occurs with child maltreatment (e.g., Chan, 2011), limited support for the tenets of resource theory can also be expected in the context of violence against children, but this requires testing.

2.5. Selection theory

This perspective suggests that although stepchildren are overrepresented as victims of child abuse, the relationship between stepfamily structure and violence is spurious. This is because common risk factors, such as general tendency toward violence and antisocial behavior, may render certain individuals more likely to both divorce and to abuse children (Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984). In support of this theory are research findings demonstrating that perpetrators of child physical abuse tend to be impulsive, have low self-esteem, experience more life stress, and are likely to have alcohol and/or drug abuse problems (Milner & Chilamkurti, 1991). Perpetrators with more psychological and behavioral problems are also more likely to use excessive violence. In a profiling study of child abuse perpetrators, Yamapolskaya, Greenbaum, and Berson (2009) found that male perpetrators with domestic violence history and perpetrators with multiple problems (including substance abuse problems, criminal records, and history of domestic violence) were most likely to commit a fatal assault on a child. Furthermore, lack of appropriate coping mechanisms to deal with stress, lack of empathy toward victims, intimacy deficits, and loneliness have all been identified as risk factors for the perpetration of child sexual abuse (Whitaker et al., 2008). Similar risk factors, including anger, lacking sympathy/tenderness, as well as being more impulsive, may also play a role in divorce (Tucker, Kressin, Spiro, & Ruscio, 1998). However, although these studies have pointed to common risk factors for divorce and child abuse, they do not explain the correlation between stepfamily structure and child maltreatment. This is because, arguably, divorced individuals who are impulsive and aggressive are less likely to find a new partner and remarry for the same reasons they divorced. In addition, for some people divorce and remarriage may be an attempt at creating a better family life situation.

2.6. Labeling theory

Rooted in the tradition of symbolic interactionism, Gelles and Harrop (1991) proposed that the observed increased incidence of child physical abuse in stepfamilies can be accounted for by labeling theory. Specifically, the authors argued that because social workers expect more children living in stepfamilies to be maltreated, they are more likely to formally report cases of alleged physical abuse involving stepchildren. Therefore, research based on formal reports of child abuse may be inherently flawed. Although formal reports can offer some unique insights into how child abuse by stepparents can be manifested, they should not be used to assess the prevalence of child maltreatment across family structures.

3. Empirical research findings on child abuse in stepfamilies

Some of the earliest studies exploring characteristics of individuals who resort to violence against children found a significant relationship between stepparenting and child abuse. For example, Gil (1970), in his seminal study of reported cases of abuse, demonstrated that 13.6% of all abuse perpetrators were stepparents, with stepfathers being particularly prone to abuse their stepchildren. Similar findings were presented in other studies which also utilized officially reported cases of child abuse (e.g., Burgess & Garbarino, 1983; Maden, 1980; Martin & Walters, 1982). However, the focus on officially reported cases of abuse is unlikely to provide an accurate statistical picture of family-level risk factors for child maltreatment because most abuse is not formally disclosed or reported (Radford et al., 2011; Wekerle, 2013; Zeuthen & Hagelskjær, 2013). Indeed, notwithstanding the importance of official reports, survey studies demonstrate a much higher proportion of children with a history of maltreatment than officially recorded by CPS (Gilbert et al., 2009b). There are myriad reasons for not reporting own abuse experiences, some of the most prominent ones being young age, social stigma experienced following disclosure, or not construing the way one is treated as abusive (Debowska et al., 2018). Professionals working with children as well as other adults who suspect a child is being abused may not make a formal report to authorities due to belief that reporting causes intrusions into family, their dissatisfaction with CPS, as well as desire to avoid court proceedings (Humphries, Debowska, Boduszek, & Mattison, 2016; Vulliamy & Sullivan, 2000). Even in countries where law requires childcare professionals to report suspected child abuse and neglect (CAN), underreporting is a considerable problem (Matthews & Walsh, 2004). This suggests that both victims and witnesses are reluctant to report abuse.

To address limitations ensuing from analyzing official abuse records, the National Incidence Study (NIS) was developed (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2020). The NIS is a congressionally mandated, periodic research effort to assess the incidence of CAN in the United States using data from a representative sample of professionals working with families. To date, four waves of the research have been conducted. Although early reports from the first NIS (NIS-1) indicated that stepfathers were particularly common among sexual abusers, this apparent overrepresentation may be due to not controlling for important socio-demographic characteristics which may confound the relationship between type of caretaker and child abuse (Giles-Sims & Finkelhor, 1984). Contrary to earlier research findings,

data from the second NIS (NIS-2) demonstrated that the rate of overall violence was significantly lower for stepchildren compared with all other children in the study. However, the researchers acknowledged the possible methodological limitations, such as the smaller than expected percentage of stepparents included in the sample and the differences in age distributions of children residing with stepparents compared to children residing with genetic parents, which could have biased the results (Gelles & Harrop, 1991). In spite of those limitations, these findings contested the nearly 20-year record of research findings mostly based on clinical or official data indicating that stepparents are more likely than genetic parents to abuse children. Further, in the final report on the findings from the third NIS (NIS-3), stepfamily structure was not listed as a risk factor for child abuse. Family-level risk factors in this study wave included single parents, large families, and low-income families (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Most recently, data from the fourth NIS (NIS-4) revealed that, in relation to family structure, children living with their married biological parents experienced the lowest rate of abuse (Sedlak et al., 2010). Sedlak et al.'s analysis of the data revealed that children living with one biological parent and their partner, compared with those living with both biological parents, had more than 10 times the rate of abuse and nearly 8 times the rate of neglect, challenging earlier findings reported by Gelles and Harrop (1991). Nevertheless, it must be noted here that adequate testing of whether children with a stepfamily family structure are at an increased risk of abuse compared with children with different family structures, requires controlling for many socio-demographic characteristics which may also have an effect on the occurrence of child maltreatment and which may be overrepresented in stepfamilies (e.g., large household size and low income).

3.1. Child physical abuse

As indicated by the theoretical frameworks presented earlier in this chapter, children living with unrelated adults may be at an increased risk of physical abuse compared with children living with biological parents. This association has been supported by many empirical investigations. For example, in Creighton's (1985) epidemiological study of abused children and their families in the United Kingdom between 1977 and 1982, father substitutes were significantly more likely to physically abuse children than genetic fathers. However, this analysis was based on records of children placed on the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) registers. A criterion for putting a child on such a register was that they had sustained physical injury, meaning that the less severe cases of physical abuse

were unlikely to be recorded. Moreover, the caregivers of the abused children in the sample were characterized by early parenthood, marital instability, large households, criminality, and mobility, i.e., factors associated with more violence. It therefore appears that children living in more troubled families and less safe neighborhoods were more likely to be placed on a register, perhaps rendering the findings ungeneralizable to the UK general population. The use of this sample could have led to overestimating the effect of stepfamily structure on child physical abuse. Indeed, other studies have demonstrated that the risk of child physical abuse is greater for children living in isolated, impoverished, and less stable neighborhoods (Freisthler, Gruenewald, Ring, & LaScala, 2008; Kalil & Ryan, 2010), which further challenges Creighton's (1985) findings.

In recognizing the possibility that a wide range of factors rather than or in addition to a single family characteristic can affect the risk of child physical abuse, Malvaso, Delfabbro, Proeve, and Nobes' (2015) study focused on a broad range of variables, including socio-economic, parent, and child characteristics. The researchers analyzed the data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), which is a national study of child development, health, and wellbeing. The analysis was based solely on Cohort K at Wave 3 children (aged 8-9 years, $N = 4,331$). When not controlling for additional factors, an elevated risk of physical injury and multiple injury was found among children living in stepfamilies (23.2% and 4.6% respectively) compared with children living with both biological parents (16.1% and 2.2% respectively). There were no significant differences between the groups in the rates of hospitalization, which could indicate comparable severity of injuries sustained by the two groups of children. Further analyses revealed that children residing in stepfamilies differed significantly on important contextual factors from children residing in biological families. More specifically, stepfamilies were characterized, among other disadvantages, by lower socio-economic status, greater financial hardship, poorer living conditions, more problematic alcohol use by mothers, mothers' lower levels of education, mothers' lower age, larger households, and greater mobility. In addition, children in stepfamilies scored significantly higher on a range of problem behavior indicators (such as conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems). When controlling for all these factors in a single statistical model, membership of a stepfamily no longer significantly predicted child injury. This finding demonstrates that stepfamily structure may not be a risk factor for child physical abuse, but may be related to the presence of other risk factors. Nonetheless, even though the sample

used was representative of 8-9 year olds in the Australian population, the number of children identified as residing in stepfamilies was low ($n = 194$) compared with the number of children living with two biological parents ($n = 3255$). Therefore, additional studies with larger sample sizes and from more diverse cultural backgrounds are needed to verify the findings.

In yet another study exploring how the presence of a stepfather affects the risk of child physical abuse, Alexandre, Nadanovsky, Moraes, and Reichenheim (2010) administered a face-to-face questionnaire to mothers of children aged 1-12 years visiting two public outpatient pediatric clinics in Brazil. The study found that physical abuse was reported for 34% of children living with stepfathers compared with 17.6% of children living with birth father. When adjusted for other risk factors, the odds ratio for physical abuse or severe physical abuse in a family with mother and stepfather was 2.7 compared to households with both genetic parents. Unexpectedly, however, the authors found that the abuse was predominantly perpetrated by biological mothers rather than stepfathers. This surprising finding could be explained by the methodology, as mothers were asked to report abuse on behalf of their children. Therefore, respondents may have been motivated to paint an overly positive picture of their new partners, a claim that is supported by a tendency for mothers to disbelieve true claims of abuse against stepfathers made by their own children (Cyr, Wright, McDuff, & Perron, 2002). Although this finding requires a more thorough empirical investigation, it appears that violence in such cases may be influenced by stressors associated with divorce, stepfamily formation, and stepfamily life.

3.2. Child sexual abuse

In a global study by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2014), it was reported that approximately 20% of women and 5-10% of men were sexually victimized as children. The consequences associated with child sexual abuse include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and substance disorders (Mullers & Dowling, 2008). Research findings also revealed that sexually abused children experience more problems than children who were maltreated in other ways (Lewis, McElroy, Harlaar, & Runyan, 2016). In addition, incestuous abuse by a relative results in more negative consequences than sexual abuse perpetrated by nonrelatives (Stroebe et al., 2012).

Stepchildren are argued to be at increased risk of sexual abuse perpetrated by stepparents for several reasons, as suggested by theoretical frameworks presented earlier. While the assumptions of relevant theories regarding stepparents and sexual abuse have not

been explicitly tested, research has sought to examine risk factors associated with sexual abuse, including the presence of stepparents within the familial structure. For example, in Creighton's (1985) epidemiological study of abused children and their families, a substantial proportion of sexually abused children were reared in non-nuclear families. Of these victims in non-nuclear families, the most common conjugal situation of their parents was genetic mother and stepfather. Moreover, stepfathers were significantly more likely to sexually abuse daughters compared to genetic fathers. This finding is supported in other studies (Faust, Runyon, & Kenny, 1995; Hwa et al., 2010; Paveza, 1998), and may extend to mother's paramours and male acquaintances (Finkelhor, 1980; Shah, Dail, & Heinrichs, 1995). However, as some of these studies rely on official records of abuse (e.g. Creighton, 1985; Paveza, 1998), the data may be inaccurate. For instance, official records detect substantially fewer abuse cases than self-reported data (Radford et al., 2011), and there are specific concerns about the willingness of boys to disclose sexual abuse victimizations to authorities (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990; Negriff, Schneiderman, Smith, Schreyer, & Trickett, 2014). Nonetheless, findings indicate that stepfather-daughter incest is the most common form of stepparent perpetrated child sexual abuse. A recent meta-analysis sought to examine risk factors for child sexual abuse victimization and concluded that the presence of a stepfather had a small effect on risk of child sexual abuse (Assink et al., 2019). Additionally, it was found that a strong moderator of the risk was the proportion of male children in the sample. Specifically, samples with higher proportions of males found weaker risks associated with the presence of a stepfather on child sexual abuse. Hence, most research has targeted the apparent unique relationship between the presence of stepfathers and the sexual abuse of young girls.

Stepfamilies are likely to be characterized by several stressors which may confound the relationship between stepfathers and child sexual abuse. For instance, it has been found that girls raised by a genetic mother and stepfather were at greater risk of sexual abuse, but were often victimized by males other than the stepfather (Finkelhor, 1980). The mother-daughter relationship seemed pivotal in explaining this finding, as emotional and physical distance in this relationship increased the daughter's risk of childhood sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1980), which may imply an influence of attachment. Indeed, a case-control study comparing families where child sexual abuse had occurred and families where no such abuse was reported found that emotional closeness between mother and daughter was associated with an eleven-fold increased risk of sexual abuse (Paveza, 1998), although this study did not

investigate the influence of stepfathers. Additional risk factors such as the mother's inclination to be less supportive when the perpetrator is a stepfather may leave daughters vulnerable to severe abuse (Cyr et al., 2002; Faust et al., 1995). It is therefore worth studying more closely the mother-daughter relationship as this may partially explain the effect of stepfathers on increased risk of sexual abuse. Several other facets of family life were associated with increased risk of sexual abuse, including low income, marital satisfaction, presence of IPV, daughters assuming maternal roles at an immature age, inadequate housing, social isolation, and alcohol dependency (Faust et al., 1995; Paveza, 1998). Therefore, it is plausible that the relationship between stepfathers and child sexual abuse could be explained by other aspects of the family environment.

It has been posited that the absence of a genetic father removes quality investment typically afforded to the daughters (Daly & Wilson, 2007), and that disruption to the conjugal relationship, specifically the introduction of a stepfather, is associated with increased risk of sexual abuse, which has some support (Finkelhor et al., 1990). This may be because girls raised in such a familial environment do not receive appropriate guidance to identify or cope with situations where there is a risk of sexual abuse, or are more likely to be exposed to potential abusers. Indeed, some evidence suggests that abusive fathers (genetic or non-genetic) differ from non-abusive fathers in that they are less involved in childcare, less assertive, have lower social competencies, and have lower self-esteem (Faust et al., 1995). This suggests that the parental investment of sexually abusive fathers may be of low quality. Further research is required to test whether stepfathers are more likely to resemble these characteristics associated with low quality parental investment. There is, however, evidence that abusive stepfathers perpetrate more severe sexual abuse than abusive genetic fathers (Russell, 1983), which may be related to a lack of incest aversion.

Although the extant literature indicates a relationship between the presence of a stepfather and increased risk of childhood sexual abuse victimization (particularly for girls), the evidence base does not point to an obvious answer. What appears to be a direct relationship between stepfathers and child sexual abuse perpetrated against daughters may be a spurious finding due to the influence of confounding variables within the family environment. Indeed, little is known about precisely how the presence of a stepfather increases the risk of child sexual abuse for girls.

3.3. Child homicides

Child homicide is the intentional killing of a child or infant. The terms filicide, infanticide, and neonaticide have been used interchangeably in child homicide studies. Even though infanticide refers to the killing of an infant (under the age of one year), it has frequently been used to denote the killing of a child of any age by a caregiver. Neonaticide corresponds to the killing of a child in the first 24 hours after birth, while filicide refers to the killing of a child over the age of 12 months (Bourget, Grace, & Whitehurst, 2007; Stanton & Simpson, 2002). Homicide statistics identify children under the age of one as the most likely victims of violence, including homicide (Brookman & Nolan, 2006; Paulozzi & Sells, 2002). Although official statistics indicate that child homicide is a relatively rare occurrence, this may be partly due to some crimes being undetected (Haapasalo & Petäjä, 1999). Indeed, some child homicide cases may be miscategorized as death by another cause (UNICEF, 2003).

In a recent review of studies investigating victim, perpetrator, and offense characteristics in filicide, Debowska, Boduszek, and Dhingra (2015) demonstrated that child homicides perpetrated by genetic parents and stepparents differ considerably in terms of underlying motivational factors. Genetic parents are more likely to choose methods of killing which produce quick and painless death, whereas stepparents are more likely to kill their wards by beating (Liem & Koenraadt, 2008; Weekes-Shackelford & Shackelford, 2004). Stepparents' tendency to choose more brutal means of homicide is revealing of more feelings of bitterness and resentment than witnessed in offenses perpetrated by genetic parents (Daly & Wilson, 1998). In addition, the killing of genetic offspring, compared with the killing of stepchildren, more often led to subsequent suicide of a male perpetrator (Wilson, Daly, & Daniele, 1995). Stepfathers who kill their offspring tend to be relatively young, antisocial, have criminal convictions, and a history of substance abuse (Hicks & Gaughan, 1995; Kasim & Cheah, 1995; Nobes, Panagiotaki, & Russell Jonsson, 2019), suggesting that aggression toward children may be rooted in caregivers' psychopathic tendencies. Individuals scoring high on psychopathic traits are characterized by disturbed personality patterns, with a deep lack of empathy (Boduszek, Debowska, Dhingra, & DeLisi, 2016) and increased levels of aggression, both reactive and instrumental (Blair, 2007). Characteristics such as callousness, impulsivity, and grandiosity increase the likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior (Debowska, Boduszek, Hyland, & Goodson, 2014; Hart & Hare, 1997). Indeed, empirical research revealed a strong positive association between psychopathy and violence (e.g., Dolan & Doyle, 2000;

Salekin, Rogers, & Sewell, 1996; Skeem & Mulvey, 2001). Psychopaths were also described as sensation seekers driven by sadistic impulses (Porter & Woodworth, 2007). Since child homicides by stepfathers are often marked by greater brutality, psychopathic tendencies may be a useful theoretical framework in explaining this phenomenon in future studies.

Although research on stepparental child homicide is still scarce and findings are inconclusive, studies conducted to date have demonstrated that children living with non-natal caregivers are at a greater risk of lethal injury compared with children living with both biological parents. Daly and Wilson (1994) noted that this risk is more than 100 times higher among very young stepchildren compared to genetic children. Schnitzer and Ewigman's (2005) investigated the role of household composition as an independent risk factor for inflicted-injury death among children below the age of 5 years. The analysis involved 149 children who died in Missouri between January 1992 and December 1999 as well as two age-matched controls per fatal case randomly selected from children who died of natural causes. The researchers found that children residing in households with unrelated adults were nearly 50 times more likely to die of inflicted injuries than children residing with two genetic parents. In households with unrelated adults, most perpetrators (83.9%) were the unrelated adult household member. These results demonstrate that young children living with unrelated caregivers are at an exceptionally high risk of fatal injury. Weekes-Shackelford and Shackelford (2004) reported similar findings for American children aged less than 5 years. The researchers extracted information on 3,925 filicide cases from national-level database of Supplementary Homicide Reports (SHRs) for the years 1976-1994 in the United States. Based on comparisons with population estimates of genetic fathers and stepfathers, results showed child homicide rates of 60 per million children by stepfathers, and 7 per million children by genetic fathers, an increased risk of 8.57. That is, child homicide occurred more frequently among the smaller group of non-genetically related perpetrators. However, this risk could have been overestimated because population surveys only indicate how many children live with stepfathers and so the true proportions of children with stepfathers (cohabiting and non-cohabiting) are unknown.

Harris, Hilton, Rice, and Eke (2007) examined 378 cases of parental and stepparental filicide which occurred in Canada prior to 2003. Data were obtained from the Violent Crime Linkage Analysis System (ViCLAS) and included information on perpetrator's age, sex, relationship to the victim, criminal history, and offense characteristics. Results revealed that

stepparents posed a significantly greater risk of lethal injury to children compared with genetic parents. Child homicides by stepfathers were often characterized by sexual motives and antisociality. The victims of stepfathers were usually very young. A similar behavioral pattern was found in non-human primates, whereby a newly dominant male kills offspring fathered by his predecessor (Wrangham & Peterson, 1996). The greatest risk of filicide in Harris et al.'s (2007) study, however, was represented by stepmothers. Female non-natal caregivers were frequently found to beat and injure a child, and were usually known to child abuse services prior to the homicide. The risk of abuse and maltreatment significantly increased with the presence of stepmother's genetic offspring. This may indicate that women do not want to invest resources in children to whom they did not give birth. In contrast, Mariano, Chan, & Myers (2014) found that the most common stepparental filicide event was stepfathers killing stepsons, followed by stepfathers killing stepdaughters. Of all stepparental child homicides, 92% were perpetrated by males. In addition, stepparents, when compared with biological parents, were significantly more likely to kill using firearms.

Most recently, Nobes et al.'s (2019) research inquired into child homicide by fathers in Britain between 2000 and 2015 as recorded by the Home Office's Homicide Index. To address limitations of prior research, Nobes et al. made more accurate estimates of family composition in the population using data from three large British surveys. This analysis revealed that children aged between 0-4 years were 15.74 times more likely to be killed by a stepfather compared to a genetic father. The increased risk was much less pronounced for stepchildren aged 5-9 years (1.60) as well as stepchildren aged 10-17 years (2.85). All of these odds ratios were reduced when only data from cohabiting father-child dyads were analyzed. This indicates that a substantial amount of risk to children is posed by non-cohabiting adults. In considering the physical distance that characterizes the relationship between a child and non-cohabiting adult, such violence could be explained by poor attachment bonds between the child and the perpetrator. Indeed, the usefulness of exploring attachment issues in child homicide context is supported by earlier research which found that mothers who murdered their children were likely to have an insecure attachment with them (Barone, Bramante, Lionetti, & Pastore, 2014). In addition, stepfathers in Nobes et al.'s (2019) data set were found to be much younger than genetic fathers. When father's age was included in the analysis, it accounted for much of the overrepresentation of stepfathers among the perpetrators and so the researchers concluded that stepfathers posed little or no greater risk to children than

genetic fathers. The influence of confounding variables on the association between family structure and child homicide was also acknowledged in Temrin, Nordlund, and Sterner's (2004) study. Using official data of all children in Sweden who died as a result of violence between 1965-1999, the researchers found that stepchildren were not overrepresented as victims of lethal parental violence. These results highlight the importance of controlling for confounds when comparing the risk of lethal injury between genetic and non-genetic children.

4. Conclusions and directions for future research

Research into child abuse by stepparents is fraught with difficulties. Firstly, theoretical frameworks proposed to account for violence perpetrated by non-natal caregivers have a limited explanatory power and some have not been empirically tested at all. A fundamental methodological problem observed in the literature, especially in studies related to child homicide, is the use of perpetrator samples drawn from correctional and forensic psychiatric settings. Findings based on such samples are biased and may lack internal validity. Control samples drawn from the general population have been rarely recruited and, hence, potential risk factors leading to violence toward children cannot be confidently identified. Research utilizing samples composed of treatment participants and matched controls is needed for more reliable estimates of risk posed to children by stepparents to be made. Future research should also distinguish between cohabiting and non-cohabiting stepparents. Such studies could explore differences in attachment bonds between stepparents residing and not residing with their stepchildren and test whether those differences can account for violence against children. Even though research based on national data related to children's wellbeing and records of all children who died in a specific time period are more generalizable to the general population, such data sets are unlikely to contain information on perpetrator characteristics, other than the nature of their relationship with the child. In some instances, however, those records could be linked with other data sets to access information on caregivers' psychopathology or criminal history. Such rich data could be subject to multilevel modeling, which would reduce overstatement of statistical significance observed in studies using traditional statistical techniques and allow for estimating group effects simultaneously with the effects of group-level predictors. Even though linking data from different sources would

be time-consuming, findings based on the analysis of such data would be indispensable in designing appropriate preventive measures to ensure safety of all children.

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