

What are the mechanisms underpinning intergenerational transmission of violence? A realist review protocol

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FM conceptualised the study. LN drafted the protocol with input from FM. All authors commented on the draft.

Future – please provide feedback

ML to design data extraction sheet with help of GJMT and FM. ML, CLH, and KMB conducted the searches, screening and data extraction. All authors to review data extraction sheets. ML, CLH, and KMB to conduct the data analysis under guidance of GJMT. FM to write the first draft. All authors to comment and edit the paper.

Background

Exposure to violence has been consistently associated with detrimental outcomes across the life course. Individuals exposed to violence are at higher risk for injury, infectious diseases, and mental

health problems in later years (Hillis, Mercy, & Saul, 2017). More specifically, exposure to child abuse and neglect and adverse childhood experiences is associated with an increased risk of mental ill health, sexually risky behaviour, alcohol and drug use, interpersonal and self-directed violence, and injury due to intimate partner violence (IPV) (Hughes et al., 2017; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2014). In studying the effects of exposure to violence, there has been a consistent and long-standing interest in the so-called ‘cycle of violence’ or the intergenerational transmission of violence. The notion of intergenerational transmission of violence is essentially concerned with whether or not an adult’s experience of violence in their own childhood increases the risk that they will then perpetrate violence or be at increased risk of violence exposure in later life. Conceptually, two approaches are distinct in intergenerational transmission of violence; the victim-to-perpetrator approach, or the direct transmission approach, is more commonly invoked and refers to instances where those exposed to maltreatment go on to perpetrate abusive behaviour towards their own children (Madigan et al., 2019). On the other hand, the victim-to-victim approach, or the indirect transmission approach, refers to instances where individuals exposed to maltreatment go on to have children who become victims of abusive behaviour themselves, even if the parent may not themselves be perpetrating it.

Numerous reviews have synthesised the literature on intergenerational transmission of violence, examining effects on outcomes such as intimate partner violence, child maltreatment, positive and negative parenting behaviours, and moderators of intergenerational transmission of violence (Assink et al., 2018; Ertem, Leventhal, & Dobbs, 2000; Gerino, Calderera, Curti, Brustia, & Rollè, 2018; Greene, Haisley, Wallace, & Ford, 2020a; Langevin, Marshall, & Kingsland, 2019; Madigan et al., 2019; Savage, Tarabulsy, Pearson, Collin-Vézina, & Gagné, 2019; Schofield, Lee, & Merrick, 2013; Stith et al., 2000; Thornberry, Knight, & Lovegrove, 2012). A key finding in many of these reviews is that there are significant methodological limitations in primary studies examining transmission of violence. For instance, Thornberry et al. (2012) found that the majority of included studies did not meet even half of the methodological criteria applied, such as representative samples, low attrition rate, samples that include both maltreated and non-maltreated individuals, verification of maltreatment status, controlling for antecedent factors, using prospective data etc. Of the nine studies which were methodologically adequate, four studies found general support for the hypothesis that there is continuity in maltreatment across generations, three found limited support for one type of maltreatment, and two found no support for the hypothesis. In addition to the methodological variability in this literature, recent reviews have also highlighted the lack of methodological complexity, such as by using dichotomous variables and prioritising certain constructs and measures to assess a complex phenomenon e.g. physical violence and the frequent use of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Haselschwerdt, Savasuk-Luxton, & Hlavaty, 2019). Building on the methodological criteria considered by Thornberry et al., (2012), Madigan et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis and found modest associations ($d = 0.45$ 95% CI: .37-.54) between a parental history of maltreatment and

maltreatment in the next generation. Moderator analyses showed that the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment did not differ based on the study quality criteria and in this regard contradicted earlier findings from Thornberry et al. (2012). However, it is notable that effect sizes decreased as study quality increased. A recent systematic review found that despite the variation in methodological quality, a history of child physical abuse and witnessing IPV was associated with greater risk of abusive or neglectful parenting, but not for child sexual abuse (Greene et al., 2020). A systematic review of qualitative research also confirmed experiential facets of the intergenerational transmission of violence among adult First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Women (Williams, Gifford, Vanderspank-Wright, & Phillips, 2019).

Despite these findings, a recent umbrella synthesis has confirmed the persistent observation that being exposed to violence is by no means equivalent to necessarily perpetrating violence in subsequent generations (van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Coughlan, & Reijman, 2020). Therefore, it appears that some individuals who are exposed to violence go on to perpetrate and others do not. What might be causing this variation? In other words, what is the mechanism by which violence may or may not be, transmitted across generations? Furthermore, the body of evidence focuses exclusively on intra-familial violence and there is little evidence how extra-familial violence such as community violence, bullying, youth violence or gang violence might be associated with intergenerational transmission of violence. A recent study found that IPV has mental health consequences for direct victims as well as communities. In a nationally representative study in South Africa, Meffert et al. (2015) found that increased depression symptoms among women are associated with an increase in the perceived frequency of neighbourhood domestic violence, indicating the community level mental health effects of neighbourhood violence. Therefore, it is important to explore contexts and mechanisms through which violence could be transmitted to have an effect on certain outcomes. Realist perspectives enable us to address this important gap in the evidence due to their focus on understanding “what works for whom in what circumstances, and why” (Pawson & Manzano-Santaella, 2012). To the authors’ knowledge, there are no reviews which have focused on this specific aspect of intergenerational violence transmission, and certainly no realist reviews which have done so. Therefore, we will conduct a realist review to synthesise evidence from a wide range of sources to investigate how, why, and in what contexts intergenerational violence transmission takes place.

Methods

Research Questions

This review aims to identify, characterise and synthesise evidence on the intergenerational transmission of violence to theorise and provide evidence for the mechanisms by which exposure to

violence in childhood, including child maltreatment, domestic violence, bullying, and community violence (e.g., gang conflicts within the community, violent criminal offences), can reduce or increase the occurrence of specified outcomes such as intimate partner violence (victimisation and perpetration) and child maltreatment or exposure to all types of violence. This review aims to develop, refine, and propose a theoretical framework that depicts configurations of **mechanisms** which connect **contexts** of violence exposure with various violence transmission **outcomes** (CMOs), including experiencing and perpetrating IPV and community violence. By doing so, this review will add to existing literature on intergenerational transmission of violence by identifying and articulating the mechanisms through which exposure to violence influences the occurrence of specific violence-related outcomes. Specifically, we ask the following research question: How, why, and under what conditions does exposure to violence in childhood impact short and long-term outcomes relating to perpetration and further victimisation of violence?

Realist Review

This research question will be answered using a realist review approach. Realist reviews have an explanatory focus, and are based on a generative model of causality (Pawson, Greenhalgh, Harvey, & Walshe, 2005). Such a model of causality holds that “to infer a causal outcome (O) between two events (X and Y), one needs to understand the underlying mechanism (M) that connects them and the context (C) in which the relationship occurs” (ibid; pp.21-22). Realist syntheses are rooted in a realist philosophy whose core tenets emphasise that there is a social reality which cannot be measured directly, but can be measured indirectly (Wong, Greenhalgh, Westhorp, Buckingham, & Pawson, 2013). Realist research uses the concept of mechanisms, defined as underlying entities, processes or structures which operate in particular contexts, to generate outcomes of interest, to understand complex relationships (Astbury & Leeuw, 2010). One of the most important processes in a realist review is to ‘surface’ or develop a programme theory, which determines what works, for whom, and under what circumstances (Pawson et al., 2005). Realist reviews are theory-driven and involve gathering and categorising key theories and tracing evidence to confirm or refute them, thereby ensuring that the focus remains on mechanisms that link contexts and outcomes. Realist approaches also do not prioritise qualitative or quantitative evidence, and see the value in combining both types of evidence during the review process (Kastner et al., 2012). Despite the large number of systematic reviews on the intergenerational transmission of violence detailed in the Background section, there is a relative dearth of realist syntheses which unpack mechanisms through violence transmission may, or may not, occur. Moreover, despite the important role of culture in the definitions and occurrence of violence, there is a paucity of research examining cultural influences on why violence transmission why and how violence transmission takes place (Kim, 2012).

Stages of a Realist Review

This realist review will follow a modified procedure based on the five steps laid out by Pawson et al. (2005).

Step 1: Locate and categorise existing theories

In the first step, we will identify existing theories which explain violence transmission in order to develop an initial overall programme theory of violence transmission and explain how transmission takes place to produce violence-related outcomes. At this stage, we will examine theories that help us explain specific aspects of violence transmission e.g. how specific cultures, individual characteristics, type of violence exposure, and victimisation or perpetration of violence, and how these theories relate to each other. In this stage, we will identify theories by using two strategies. First, we will search existing literature to theorise how and why violence transmission might take place. Second, we will consult an expert group on intergenerational violence transmission, comprising of researchers, practitioners, and academics, to better refine the initial list of theories and overall programme theory identified. We will undertake a remote expert panel meeting using targeted discussions on theories explaining intergenerational violence transmission. We will obtain the necessary ethical approval. In addition to helping identify existing theories, the expert group will contribute to emerging findings from the review via email. These theories identified in Step 1 will inform our initial conceptualisation of the programme theory, which we will test and refine in the second step.

Step 2: Search for evidence

Several recent reviews have been conducted on intergenerational violence transmission, most commonly examining quantitative studies on exposure to child maltreatment and later parenting and intimate partner violence (Greene, Haisley, Wallace, & Ford, 2020; Langevin et al., 2019; Madigan et al., 2019; Savage et al., 2019). This means that a new extensive primary search is not likely to be helpful in fulfilling the aims of this review. Furthermore, past reviews have predominantly considered studies that satisfied quantitative methodological criteria, such as representative samples, validated measures, and a reported association between exposure to violence and subsequent re-victimisation or perpetration, which means other study designs such as qualitative studies were excluded. Such studies may contain important information which might contribute to the realist review and therefore, the list of studies which were included and excluded at the full-text screening stage will be re-examined for inclusion in the realist review. We note that in a realist review the assumption is that there is not a finite set of relevant papers, and so some amount of purposiveness needs to be adopted while

searching for studies, as opposed to a ‘comprehensive’ approach that is the focus of a systematic review (Pawson, Greenhalgh, Harvey, & Walshe, 2004).

The results from recent reviews will be updated for this realist review by searching the following electronic databases: EMBASE, Global Health, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Pubmed, Sociological Abstracts, Cochrane Library, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. We note that one important feature of past reviews is that they typically considered the effects of exposure to child maltreatment and not other forms of violence which are included in this review, such as bullying, witnessing IPV, youth violence, gang violence and community violence. Therefore, we will develop a new search strategy to uncover studies which examined these other forms of violence as well but limit it to studies published after 1990 as we consider it unlikely that relevant studies exist before this date.

This realist review will follow a three-stage search process:

1. We will search published quantitative systematic reviews to explore what types of violence exposures and their intergenerational transmission have been investigated in the literature and possible contexts and mechanisms of these exposures. Common types of violence exposures such as child maltreatment, IPV, domestic violence will be searched.

Search terms for stage 1 are:

| | | |
|---|-----|--|
| 1 | | child OR children OR infant* OR baby OR babies OR teen* OR adolescen* OR youth* OR toddler* OR young person OR young people OR minor OR teen* |
| 2 | AND | (maltreat* abuse OR punish* OR mistreat* OR neglect* OR abandon* OR harm* OR offen* OR assault* OR rap* OR molest* OR exploit* OR spank* OR hit* OR smack OR victimi*) OR violence |
| 3 | AND | intergeneration* OR multigeneration* OR transgeneration* OR generation* |
| 4 | AND | transmission OR pathway* OR continuities |
| 5 | AND | review* OR overview* OR meta-analy* OR metaanaly* OR metanaly* OR meta-regression* OR metaregression* OR (meta NEAR/1 regression*) OR synthes* OR metasynthes* OR meta-synthes* OR metaethnograph* OR meta-ethnograph* |

2. We will search for qualitative evidence that matches types of violence exposures identified in stage 1; that is, to find qualitative research that complements exposures synthesised in systematic reviews identified in stage 1. Further to this, quantitative and qualitative evidence will be juxtaposed to refine how contexts and mechanisms intersect to generate outcomes.

3. Based on evidence from stages 1 and 2 we will identify violence exposures that have not been addressed in the literature but that would be theoretically salient (i.e. to extend or test our developing theory), and conduct purposive searches for both quantitative and qualitative evidence, at both primary study and systematic review level. Since searching in realist reviews is an iterative process (Pawson et al., 2005), the types of violence exposures may be modified or expanded as the search progresses.

We will also employ the following search strategies to ensure relevant studies are identified:

1. Citations in reference lists of included studies
2. Forward and backward citation searching
3. Checking linked papers on websites designed for this purpose, such as <https://www.connectedpapers.com/>
4. Contacting experts such as researchers, policy makers, and professionals
5. Posting a request for relevant studies on Twitter
6. Grey literature searching on ProQuest, SVRI, ISPCAN, WHO, and UNICEF websites.

Step 3: Study selection criteria

In general, we will not exclude studies based on study designs i.e., qualitative and quantitative studies, policy reports, and other study types will be included. In considering relevant studies, we will include information contained not only in the results or findings sections, but also in other sections such as the discussion explaining the implications of qualitative or quantitative findings or the introduction which provides descriptions of theories. Searches will be limited to the English language and all countries and settings will be considered.

In screening and appraising documents for inclusion, we will screen all titles and abstracts in accordance with two criteria: relevance which assesses if the study contributes to building theory, and rigour, which assesses if the inference drawn by the study has sufficient weight to make a methodologically credible contribution to testing theory (Pawson et al., 2004). We will use the following inclusion criteria: (i) studies which focus on intergenerational violence transmission; (ii) describe or contain information that can be used to unpack mechanisms of intergenerational violence transmission; (iii) initial exposure to violence is defined broadly and includes any violence against children including child maltreatment, bullying, witnessing domestic violence, and community violence; (iv) initial exposure to violence took place in childhood defined as the period from age 0-18 years; and (v) considers the following outcomes: future perpetration or victimisation of any types of violence. We will consider all study designs within this review. We will exclude studies where the initial exposure to violence took place in a period not defined as ‘childhood’, and those whose focus is not on the intergenerational transmission of violence. We will identify violence exposures that have

not been addressed in the literature but that would be theoretically salient (i.e. to extend or test our developing theory) based on evidence from stages 1 and 2. We will also exclude opinion pieces, editorials, non-expert commentary, and letters. In realist reviews, individual studies are not the unit of analysis; instead, sections of included studies are used to test relationships between contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes. Thus, studies will be selected based on the contribution they make to the programme theory of mechanisms underlying intergenerational transmission of violence.

Screening titles and abstracts, scrutinising studies, and applying selection criteria will be conducted in Covidence by two reviewers. Conflicts will be resolved in discussion with a third reviewer.

Step 4: Appraise studies and extract data

In appraising included studies, we will use critical appraisal instruments and frameworks appropriate for the study type under consideration e.g. Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklists for various study designs. Wong et al. (2013) note that the requirement in terms of reporting is not an “in-depth description of each decision involved” but the “broad processes used to determine relevance and rigour (for example, using quality standards appropriate to particular kinds of research to appraise documents or sections of documents; discussion and/or debate within a review team of a document’s findings; or consulting experts about technical aspects of methods or findings)”. The aim of appraising included studies in a robust way is thus to “give an indication of the coherence, plausibility and appropriateness of the processes” used to inform judgements made.

Data extraction will be conducted in order to answer our research question: how, why, and under what conditions does exposure to violence in childhood impact short and long-term outcomes relating to revictimisation and perpetration of violence? In the data extraction process, reviewers will read studies with a view to developing and refining our framework by interpreting findings through several iterative readings. New mechanisms will be added to the initial programme theory developed in step 1. CMO configurations will be scrutinised to determine if they are “thick” or “thin” i.e. whether findings are described in detail and conclusions are based on empirical results or authors’ own interpretations (or both).

Information from included studies will be added into a customised extraction form in MS Excel which will collect information on the general study characteristics (sample, population characteristics), context, mechanisms, and outcomes, as well as the richness of data and the evidence the mechanism is based on. Given that realist reviews are iterative, our original emphasis on CMOs may be modified to take on new forms e.g. Intervention–Context–Actor–Mechanism–Outcome (ICAMO) configuration

(De Weger et al., 2020). Other realist reviews will be consulted while developing a data extraction form, such as the form used in the realist review conducted by Molnar et al. (2015), which is provided below. Extraction will be conducted by two reviewers. Extraction results will be shared within the larger review team to enable feedback and reflection.

Box 1. Summary of data extraction tool

- *Page*: Page number from which the mechanism is drawn
- *Paragraph*: Paragraph on the page from which the mechanism is drawn
- *Starts with “ ___ ”*: First few words of sentence from which the mechanism is drawn
- *Jurisdiction*: Which jurisdiction(s) is the data drawn?
- *Context*: For whom? In what circumstances? Where? Context may not be immediately apparent in the section of text from which you draw the mechanism/outcome.
- *Outcome*: What is the outcome (i.e., decreased poverty, improved health behaviour)?
- *Mechanism*: How? Why?
- *Mechanism Number*: Does this mechanism in the article reflected in the mechanisms from the initial framework? If yes, assign mechanism with the associated number from the initial framework (e.g., P1, H1)
- *Mechanism is based on*: Is the evidence of the mechanism based on: empirical evidence, reference to literature, or author opinion/speculation?
- *Richness*: Is there thick or thin description of the mechanism?
- *Additional UB articles*: References found in the article that may lead to new mechanisms
- *Comments*: General comments/concerns about the article

Source: Molnar, A., O’Campo, P., Ng, E., Mitchell, C., Muntaner, C., Renahy, E., ... & Shankardass, K. (2015). Protocol: realist synthesis of the impact of unemployment insurance policies on poverty and health. *Evaluation and program planning, 48*, 1-9.

Step 5: Synthesise evidence and draw conclusions

We will synthesise extracted data from step 4 to assess initial theories and consider how mechanisms interact with contexts and outcomes to produce specific outcomes on intergenerational violence transmission. We will interrogate theories on violence transmission to determine when it takes place, under what circumstances, for whom, and why. Synthesis in a realist review is undertaken through a process of reasoning through the following steps (Pawson, 2006):

- i. Juxtaposition of sources of evidence: where evidence from one source enables insights into evidence from another source;
- ii. Reconciling of sources of evidence: where outcomes differ in comparable contexts, further analysis will be conducted to find reasons for differing outcomes;
- iii. Adjudication of evidence sources: where appraisal is conducted on methodological strengths and weaknesses;

- iv. Consolidation of evidence sources: where evidence on mechanisms and outcomes is complementary and well-rounded explanations are developed;
- v. Situating sources of evidence – where outcomes differ in particular contexts, possible explanations are developed for why they differ.

Contradictory evidence will be scrutinised to generate insights about contextual influences (Pawson et al., 2005). Conclusions will be presented as contextualised decision points in the format ‘If A, then B’ or ‘In the case of C, D is unlikely to take place’. The final programme theory will be summarised using a narrative synthesis and illustrative diagrams and graphics will be presented alongside. We will report findings in accordance with the Realist and Meta-Review Evidence Synthesis: Evolving Standards (RAMESES) publication standards (Wong et al., 2013).

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