Family Violence, Trauma and Social Learning Theory

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Family violence is a historical social problem that continues to exist among modern societies. The authors of this paper identify how children learn violent behaviors and continue to teach these behaviors to their own offspring. This paper also discusses practical techniques on how to battle this serious problem among couples and contemporary families.

Family violence is a relatively new term but not necessarily a new phenomenon in human societies. Various scientific disciplines previously traced family violence back to primitive civilization (Bakan 1971; Gelles, 1985; Korbin, 1981; Radbill, 1980; Shorter, 1975; Taylor & Newberger, 1979). Violence against intimate partners and family members has existed in a more systematic way in our culture since the modern state or statehood when civilization was formed. However, in more recent times, society has recognized violence as a social problem (Gelles, 1985).

According to Barnett, Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2005), violence is defined as "an act carried out with the intention, or perceived intention of physically hurting another person" (p.15). This definition, however, does not entirely satisfy those who have

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studied violence. Potter (1999) noted that the issue of a comprehensive definition of violence is still unresolved. This is due to varied viewpoints that differ in whether or not the operational definition should include verbal, emotional, and physical violence. Most definitions of violence do not include the verbal and emotional abuse as an act of purposeful negligence. This negligence can also be carried out against children or elderly and can be considered as a passive violence against these individuals. Potter (1999) suggested that a more comprehensive definition of violence, which would include verbal and emotional violence, is important because it gives researchers a clearer picture of violence and how individuals can become more effective in accurately assessing the risks posed by it. On the other hand, most definitions of violence are considered overly broad, since some forms of physical aggression (i.e., corporal punishment) are not generally considered acts of violence in some societies (Ripoll-Nunez & Rohner, 2006). Hence, family violence should be more narrowly defined in order to include families with existing violence and prevent the exclusion of purposeful negligent behaviors.

Levesque (2001) defined violence among family members as an "act of omission or commission resulting in physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect or other form of maltreatment that hamper individuals' healthy development" (p.17). This definition would have been a good working definition if it included the word "purposeful." An act of violence is not a random behavior among human beings (Gelles, 1980). Alfred Adler's theory of *Individual Psychology* explains that all behaviors have meanings and are purposeful (Adler, 1956) Moreover, common denominators to all violent acts, active as well as passive, can be considered anger or revenge. As a result, a more suitable definition for family violence among human beings may be the following: a purposeful act of omission or commission that is anger-driven or revenge-driven. This act results in physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse, negligence or other forms of maltreatment that interfere with the psychological, emotional, or physical development of healthy individuals.

Consistent with problems related to defining family violence, the term trauma should be defined. Trauma is an emotional wound that has long-lasting effects (Gelles, 1980). The term, trauma, was originally defined by the American Psychiatric Association in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental

Disorders *(DSM-III-R)* as an event occurring outside the continuum of usual human experience (APA, 1987). This definition was subsequently expanded in the DSM-IV-TR.

The *DSM IV-TR* no longer requires a person to be a direct subject of an act of violence to be considered traumatized. Experiencing, witnessing, being confronted, or informed with an act of violence against others can result in the development of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in an individual (APA, 2000). According to *DSM-IV-TR,* results of trauma or traumatic events include inappropriate sexual experiences without threat, actual violence or injury. Traumatic events, according to the *DSM-IV-TR,* include the unnatural death of another person caused by violent assault, accident, or, unexpectedly seeing a dead body and/or body parts. Additionally, *DSM-IV-TR* criteria indicate a person may become traumatized in response to intense fear, helplessness or horror. Such events experienced by a person other than the one traumatized include, but are not limited to, violent personal assault, serious injury experienced by a family member, or the sudden or unexpected death of a family member. The long lasting effects of trauma are known as post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) by most mental health professionals. In clinical practice and experience, mental health professionals have seen signs and symptoms of PTSD reported by children who have only heard about an act of violence toward either their parents or siblings. Van der Kolk called the human reaction to trauma a "physioneurosis" (1987).

There are two different types of family trauma: existential and pathological trauma (Gorman, 2001). However, the *DSM-IV-TR's* definition of trauma does not make a distinction between the two. For instance, the loss of a loved one or the death of a family's pet due to natural causes can have traumatic effects on individuals who witness the event. However, the effect is not as long lasting or as damaging because people are resilient and adjust to existential situations rather quickly. This type of trauma is called existential trauma, and people who experience it, for the most part, accept it as a passage of life. This is different than pathological trauma. In this case, a person may see a loved one get killed in an unexpected accident. This traumatic event may have longer lasting effects. This paper will mostly concentrate on the pathological trauma and its implications within the family.

Family Environment and Vicarious Learning

Family violence is classified in three general categories: physical violence (including child and spousal beating), emotional violence (including verbal and non-verbal and/or negligence), and incest (including all types of sexual abuse) (Foshee, Bauman, & Linder, 1999; Gelles, 1987; O'Leary, 1993). Social thinkers have tried to explain family violence that results in trauma in unique ways (Bandura, 1978; Evans, 1989). Sociologists and feminist social theorists, in particular, blame class, race and social inequalities as possible sources for family violence and believe that until reforms and adjustments are made in social institutions, these issues will continue to exist (Benson, Fox, DeMaris, & Van Wyk, 2003; Bybee & Sullivan, 2002; Staggs, Long, Mason, Krishnan, & Riger, 2007). An example of this is found in the general public belief that poor or low-status individuals are more violent in their homes as compared to rich and high-status individuals.

Bowen (1978) demonstrated that the linear casualty model (A ➔B ➔C) is no longer the case in family dysfunction (Bowen, 1978). This model was replaced by the family system's more circular model where A may affect B, which may impinge on C, which may initially have influenced A. Moreover, researchers have discovered that functional as well as dysfunctional behaviors are passed from one generation to the next within a family system (Bowen, 1978). Each family is affected by at least seven generations of behaviors, and cultural family heritage continues to grow from one generation to the next.

Social learning theory is based on several assumptions (Bandura, 1978; Evans 1989), which include vicariously learning aggression through observing (Bandura, 1977). The Social Cognitive theory was formulated on the basis of the social learning theory, which concerned itself with the limitations of social behavior and observational learning (Eyal & Rubin, 2003). In 1978, Bandura stated that "a theory of human aggression should explain (a) how aggressive patterns are formed, (b) what provokes people to behave aggressively and (c) what sustains aggressive behavior" (p.19). Dorr & Kovaric (1980) suggested that familial and environmental background and observational learning conditions interact highly with the tendencies to influence a probable aggressive response. Both of these theories illustrate that people discover behaviors through vicarious learning; meaning one

does not need to get engaged in an actual behavior directly to learn or model it. Thus, simply witnessing a behavior is sufficient to learn and later behave in the same manner. This conclusion helps explain the reason that the majority of researchers believe that family violence is repeated from one generation to the next (Bowen, 1978).

Different types of family violence may be the result of individual mental disorders. Most offenders have been victims at one point in their lives and as a result, they continue the cycle of violence (Downs, Miller, Testa, & Panek, 1992; Dutton & Hart, 1992; Fagan, Stewart, & Hansen, 1983; Marshall & Rose, 1990; Murphy, Meyer, & O'Leary, 1993; Simons, Wu, Johnson, & Conger, 1995 ; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Regardless of how one explains the origin of family violence, the solution may lie in breaking the cycle of violence as the first step (Abbassi, 2008). Two of the most widely cited statistics by Carlson (1984) and Straus (1992) estimated that at least "3.3 million children yearly are at risk of exposure to parental violence" (p. 160). Straus (1992) estimated that "at least a third of American children have witnessed violence between their parents, and most have endured repeated instances" of violence (p. 98). Many studies (Edleson & Beeman, 1999; Fantuzzo & Lindquist, 1989; Fantuzzo & Mohr, 1999; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Sandin, 1997; Jaffe & Sudermann, 1995; Kashani, Daniel, Dandoy, & Holcomb, 1992; Margolin, 1998; Rossman, 2001) indicated that most children who have developed PTSD have been exposed to domestic violence and abuse.

Among the different types of trauma, sexual trauma is the most predictive of risky behavior and seems to be more devastating, particularly for children and women (Batten, Follette, & Aban, 2001; Brener, McMahon, Warren, & Douglas, 1999). As sexual trauma may not only hurt physically, sexual trauma can also create feelings of guilt, shame, betrayal, trust and self-blame in abused children. One of the common issues that sexually abused children deal with is feeling as though they have caused the incident or deserved it in some way (Batten, Follette, & Aban, 2001). Batten, Follette and Aban (2001) looked at the relationship between risky sexual behaviors and childhood abuse. Individuals with sexual assault or abuse histories are likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors and other types of self-destructive behaviors as they grow older.

Implications for counseling

Trauma within the family may further discourage a teenager from seeking the advice of parents about risk-taking. Minuchin (1974) argued that children in the adolescent stage of life need structure. Without proper structure teens can get lost in the complexities of life. Furthermore, more often than not, abusive dysfunctional families may not provide the structure needed to support adolescents from participating in risky behavior, or may not provide appropriate supervision to reduce this behavior. Parents in abusive families were reported to be more verbally abusive and not likely to exhibit behavior that is considered emotionally healthy (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinard, 1998). Researchers (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinard, 1998; Grych & Finchem, 1990) suggested that a teen that is not connected to his or her parents would also be more likely to seek out mates for intimacy beyond what might be desired by an individual who received love and affection in his or her own family.

Even though the family may not be the only socialization agent of a child's life, the family may be the most salient factor in respect to the development of the child's emotional understanding (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinard, 1998; Grych & Finchem, 1990). Many times, family experiences and interactions teach children about social interactions, including what others may be thinking or feeling and how those feelings and thoughts are managed and expressed (Cassidy, Parke, Butkovsky, & Braungart, 1992; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Dunn, 1995; Dunn & Munn,1985; Garner, Jones, & Miner, 1994; Nixon & Watson 2001; Saarni, 1990). Bjorkqvist (1997) suggested that an adolescent's identification with the roles of his or her parents as role models created imitations in his or her behavior. Counselors may wish to focus on how children view their roles and what is modeled in the family system.

Children witnessing domestic violence exhibit more externalized behaviors such as aggression, antisocial behaviors, and oppositional defiance (Fantuzzo, DePaola, Lambert, Martino, Anderson, & Sutton, 1991; Hughes, 1988; Hughes, Parkinson & Vargo, 1989). In addition, they may experience or exhibit symptoms association with internalizing behaviors such as phobia, separation anxiety, being reserved, lower self-esteem, lower self-respect, and lower social competence as compared to other children (Adamson & Thompson, 1998; Fantuzzo et al., 1991). Children witnessing violence may also suffer more

from anxiety, depression, PTSD symptoms and develop temperamental problems (Hughes, 1988; Maker, Kemmelmeier & Peterson, 1998; Sternberg, Lamb, Greenbaum, Cicchetti, Dawud, Cortes, Krispin, & Lorey, 1993). Children become maladjusted when caregivers are consistently unreliable, absent, and/or unresponsive (Dutton, 2000). Thus, these maladjustments also delay or destroy the child's ability to develop a trusting and secure attachment to the primary caregiver. These maladjustments, if externalized, produce attachment disorders which can result in anger toward others, and, if internalized, produce depression and grief (Dutton, 2000).

Adaptive as well as maladaptive behaviors are learned in the same manner. Bandura (1977) suggested that there is an interaction of personal, behavioral and environmental variables which lend in the development and acquiring of aggressive tendencies (Eyal & Rubin, 2003). For example, childhood trauma may stem from the experience of parental shaming, poor attachment, and direct physical abuse from the primary core of abusive personality. Individuals with an abusive personality may struggle to appropriately transform their aggression and as adults often abuse their partners (Alpert, Brown, & Courtois, 1998; van der Kolk, 1987; van der Kolk & Fisler, 1994). Other factors thought to be crucial for learning positive or negative trades include symbolizing, self-efficacy, self regulation, self-reflection, and forethought (Bandura, 1978; Evans, 1989). Emphasizing healthy adaptive behaviors and discouraging maladaptive behaviors is key to working with children of abuse and preventing the cycle of violence from continuing.

Counselors should also be proactive in dismissing existing myths and stereotypes that the issues of trauma and violence are always initiated by males. Studies have shown that women initiate acts of intimate violence as often as men (Straus, 2005). However, both male and female partner violence is overwhelmingly utilized as a method of coercive control (Fiebert & Gonzales, 1997; Medeiros & Straus, 2006).

Conclusion

There is a distinct relationship between family violence, trauma and how children may easily imitate behaviors they learn by either hearing or witnessing them at home. Once children are traumatized through violence in the family, they may become more likely to induce unnecessarily difficulties in their own lives and later

traumatize their own offspring, as the vicious cycle of violence continues.

Working with couples that have an insight into how violence can become a part of their family tradition helps to reduce the frequency or perhaps stop the violent and traumatic behavior altogether. Overall, understanding the concept of vicarious learning has been a very effective technique in helping families. One of the effective techniques that the authors of this paper use in couples therapy is to ask the victim, as well as the perpetrator, whether they are aware of the fact that they are modeling this behavior for their own children. Often partners are surprised when they learn that even if by chance their offspring marries someone who is not violent, they may not know how to handle calm and non-chaotic marriage life, thus potentially leading to a failed marriage. Once this insight is developed and comprehended by the couple, further steps can be taken to ensure that children are not exposed to such scenes which may permanently damage their future relationships indirectly and perhaps at an unconscious level.

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