

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

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EXCERPTS

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Overview

This chapter examines evidence from a number of studies relating to the question of what kinds of family structures promote or inhibit either violent or nonviolent relations.

Family structure and violence

Family violence is found in cultures with family structures ranging from nuclear to extended families. It occurs across affluent and poor countries and is also observed across social classes within a nation's borders, although there appear to be social class differences in the rates within the United States, with poor families more at risk (Bachman, 1994). The translation of family structure into family practice, therefore, is complex and relies on beliefs about gender and parent-child relationships.

Beliefs about violence, aggression, and privileges of men to dominate women are central to the perpetuation of domestic violence. And since through much of recorded history these beliefs have been supported by various institutions, family violence or nonviolence is not only related to family structure, but to the large social structure and the prevailing systems of values and beliefs of a particular culture. Specifically, the family embodies and perpetuates broader societal norms and the political economy. Moreover, the family is not only influenced by, but in turn also influences, the larger social structure and culture of which it is a part. In short, what we view between families and culture is a transactive process (Eisler 1995, 1997; Lindsey, 1997).

As we will detail, there are a variety of factors that contribute to, enhance, or diminish the risk of recurrent family violence. For example, patterns of family composition can pose a risk or buffer for wife or child abuse. However, quantifiable features of family structure cannot explain the presence or absence of interpersonal physical abuse per se. The response and norms of the broader community and the cultural ideology governing attitudes towards sexual relationships and equality, childrearing practices, and violence all make central contributions to the expectations shaping sexual and family relationships (Chodorow, 1978; Eisler, 1987, 1995; Ortner, 1996).

Violent dyads: Wife abuse

Women who are abused by their husbands are also often controlled in myriad ways. These forms of control impose a policy of “patriarchal terrorism” (Johnson, 1995), terrorizing the wives and often keeping them from staying in jobs, visiting with friends, or maintaining normal social connections.

Wife abuse of varying forms occurs across cultures and geographic regions (see Table 1). In Mexico City one in three women reported violence from a spouse or partner. Another study shows that one of every five Colombian women have been beaten by a partner. Heise (1993) reports that 42% of women in Kenya admitted that they were regularly beaten by their husbands. In Papua New Guinea 67% of rural women and 56% of urban women have been abused by partners. A study from Lima, Peru shows that one out of every three women in the city’s emergency rooms were victims of domestic violence. According to estimates by the former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop in 1989, three to four million women are battered in the United States each year (Heise 1993).

One question that arises is whether this violence is more frequent or less frequent outside or inside of marriage. As we shall see, the studies do not indicate that the structure of the relationship is a consistent key factor. Rather, violence can surface as a tactic of control under virtually any set of relationship conditions.

In those cultures where a material exchange occurs between families to seal the marital union, as in the case of dowries paid from the bride’s family to the groom’s in India, or brideprice in Papua New Guinea (Morley, 1994), paid from the groom’s kin to the bride’s, the bride’s extended family has a material investment in keeping their women kin married. In the case of brideprice, if the vows are broken and the newly married woman returns to her family of origin, even as a response to abuse, the family is obligated to repay the groom. Unfortunately, the inverse is not applied to dowry exchanges; grooms are rarely obligated to return the dowry, even after the wife has died after a brief residence with her new husband’s family (even when the groom is suspected of homicide, as in the case of the recent and widely-publicized wave of dowry motivated killings in India, wherein the groom and his extended family plot to kill the new wife, in order to remarry and amass further dowries and fortune). Implicit in this situation is the belief that ownership of a daughter transfers from parents, or her father, to her husband (Pateman, 1988). After this “property transfer” has taken place, accompanied both by the husband’s commitment to financially support this woman and the wife’s commitment to respect his authority, his use of force is subsequently viewed as justified because force is a sanctioned means in the society to control subordinates - whether they be children, wives, or workers. The privilege of beating one’s wife is excerpted from the father’s privilege to beat his daughter. This cycle persists across time and generations.

A characteristic feature of battering husbands is that they willfully isolate their wives, often cutting off contact with her nascent family or other means of support, and discouraging her from employment or activities out of the home (Walker, 1979).

In short, violence against women spans a wide spectrum of relations and family structures, the common denominator being socially approved hierarchies of domination, with force or the threat of force used as a means of maintaining the domination of one member of the family over another. In male-dominated societies violence against women has generally been considered a prerogative of men. However, abuse of wives has also been perpetrated by women who are either mothers-in-law or higher ranking wives in extended patriarchal families. Both custom and law have had an important role throughout the world in protecting patriarchal rights of male family heads (Pateman, 1988).

Nonviolent dyads

Gender roles, and especially the construction of masculinity, are implicated in the expression of violence against women. When men participate more fully in childrearing, breaking out of some of the rigid restrictions of masculine gender roles that equate manliness with domination and toughness, some authors have argued that tension between the sexes diminishes (Chodorow, 1979; Coltrane, 1988). In fact, in those societies that enable men to participate extensively in childrearing women enjoy a higher social status and there is less violence than in societies that strictly exclude men from childcare (Coltrane, 1988).

Violent parenting: Child abuse

Most people would not place spanking in the same class of behaviors as child abuse, but there is research to indicate that the more corporal punishment is used against a child, the more mental health symptoms and behavior problems that child will display (Patterson, 1982; Straus, 1991). In addition, it should be kept in mind that escalated forms of physical abuse - e.g., beatings resulting in injuries - start with a single slap or spank. When spanking is widely practiced, the gate is left open for more extreme expressions of parental anger.

Both fathers and mothers who use corporal punishment believe that it is their responsibility to discipline their children, and they are in most cases well-intentioned. However, physical coercion is actually the least effective tactic for socializing children to be cooperative and other-oriented. In fact, such coercive tactics often backfire to make children defiant, noncompliant and aggressive (Patterson, 1982). Straus (1994) has campaigned vigorously against corporal punishment of all kinds in American families, pointing out that even “common spanking” results in elevated symptoms of psychopathology among children, in contrast to verbal criticism or other forms of discipline (e.g., “time out”). Unfortunately, the large body of evidence that has amassed in child socialization research demonstrating problems with coercive parenting has yet to reach most popular channels or to widely alter parental practices as yet.¹

Nuclear or two-parent families

There is no evidence that children are more likely to be spared from frequent spankings or beatings by the mother in two-parent families as opposed to single-mother families. Mothers are the principal disciplinarians within all forms of American families, particularly with young children. Fathers usually have less exposure to the children, and are in most families on the

periphery of childrearing. Various studies indicate, however, that mothers and fathers both use similar means of punishment and that mothers are as likely to spank children as fathers.

Despite the apparent parity between parents in spanking, fathers pose more of a serious physical threat when they do take over the corporal punishment of the children. Fathers are typically larger, stronger, and more imposing disciplinarians in children's eyes. They are also implicated in 75% of the cases when punishment escalates to homicide, according to a recent study in Los Angeles (Sorenson & Peterson, 1994). Other studies of child homicide in Canada over the past decade indicate that when mothers are perpetrators of homicide the children are typically under the age of 3, and fathers are more likely to be the perpetrators of children over this age (Daly & Wilson, 1988). Fathers, both biological and unrelated, therefore, are more likely to escalate abuse to homicide than mothers in two-parent families, and this effect is strongest among older children. Although lethal child abuse is relatively rare, it is nevertheless among the five most common reasons for child mortality among children under 10 in the United States according to recent Center for Disease Control statistics (Center for Disease Control, 1997).

Children are also at risk for physical abuse when their mothers are battered (McCloskey, Figueredo, & Koss, 1995; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981). They can be hurt if they try to intervene or are even present during violent marital disputes, and they are psychologically damaged by witnessing the abuse of their mothers (McCloskey et al., 1995; Wolfe et al., 1985). Violence against wives, therefore, places children at heightened physical and psychological risk even when they are not the intentional target. Those features of extended family life and community that restrict men's abuse of women within marriage simultaneously protect children.

In most single-mother headed households throughout the world maternal child abuse is no more likely than in two-parent families. For instance, among the African Ashanti single motherhood is widespread, with traditional roots, and children are well cared for. It is also the case that among the Ashanti resources in single-mother headed households are often sufficient to raise the children, since there is a long-standing history of such family structures. In Brazil, among poor women in the north Coastal areas, children are virtually never beaten, and physical child abuse is extremely rare. In these same mother-headed families infanticide within the first few weeks or months of a newborn's life is however found, essentially as a form of birth control (Scheper Hughes, 1986). But subsequent violence or even corporal punishment towards those offspring who survived is unusual. In studies conducted in the United States, however, when single-motherhood is combined with early age onset of childbearing, especially under the age of 16, the risk of child maltreatment and removal of children to foster care placements is several times higher than when the mothers are twenty-two or older or married (Goerge & Lee, 1997).

One risk factor for children of mother-headed households is the likelihood that an unrelated male partner will coreside with them. Children appear to be at greater risk for both physical and sexual abuse when there are stepfathers in the home (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Russell, 1986). The presence of stepfathers greatly increases the likelihood of child sexual abuse, especially of girls. In one college student survey conducted in California, 17 percent of the freshmen girls reported sexual abuse experiences with their mother's partners or stepfathers, in contrast to only 2% of girls who lived in two-parent families with their biological fathers (Russell, 1986).

The extended family

There are widespread beliefs that the presence of grandparents is a buffer for children, and probably inhibits abuse. However, research findings on the support provided by grandparents to young children are mixed. For instance, in one series of studies the positive contributions African-American grandmothers made to the welfare and adjustment of their grandchildren in mother-headed and intact families were examined (Taylor, Casten, & Flickinger, 1993; Taylor & Roberts, 1995). The researchers found that children in two-parent families did not appear to benefit from the coresidence of a grandmother. Children within single or divorced mother-headed households, however, did show signs of better adjustment when a grandmother lived with them. However, this effect did not seem due to the grandmother's parenting skills or direct care to the child, but to the emotional and instrumental support these grandmothers provided their daughters (Taylor & Roberts, 1995). The daughters, therefore, became more effective and less stressed during their own parenting tasks, and the children subsequently benefitted. When single mothers are nested in supportive extended family contexts the children benefit from the direct aid offered the mother.

Nonviolent parenting

There have been some studies on what kinds of skills foster nonviolent and nurturant parenting. For example, researchers in child development found that mothers who are able to develop higher levels of attunement or synchrony when interacting with toddlers, and who are able to establish a mutual focus with the child on some activity or thought, have children who are more compliant and happier than mothers who are less attuned, so to speak, to their young children (Rocissano, Slade & Lynch 1987). Flowing with the child rather than against her or him seems to be the best policy for socializing cooperativeness and stability.

Various behavioral programs have been developed to train parents to be both more attuned and more consistent in delivering rewards as well as punishment or negative reinforcement. These programs have especially emphasized the use of positive reinforcement in the repertoires of young and often single and stressed mothers (Urquiza, 1996). Parenting education programs have also been introduced in some U.S. schools to foster nurturant and nonviolent parenting.² There is also work in the family counseling field designed to encourage counselors and other health professionals to not only report family violence but help parents and other family members learn nonviolent and caring relational skills.³

Clearly the quality of the relationship between parents has a profound impact on children's coping and mental health. Studies on the impact of divorce revealed that children suffer more directly before parental separation than after the divorce, suggesting that interparental conflict rather than separation per se was most disturbing to the child (Emery, 1982). Even verbal conflict, then, has an adverse effect on children's sense of well being (Jouriles et al., 1986). The relationship of adult women and men in a household sets a climate of stability or conflict in the home for children.

Once again, the indicators of nonviolent parenting seem to be more lodged within parenting beliefs than in the size and configuration of the family. Coercive parenting engenders aggression in children, either through modeling parental aggression or through the development of an internal mental script or “working model” of antagonistic interpersonal relationships. Although there have been few direct studies to date, it appears that parents who espouse a “partnership model” with each other, are more likely to raise children to do the same, and to develop mutual respect for boundaries, opinions and interests that will benefit the child as well as the parents. The “dominator model” or traditional patriarchal family is a problematic environment for successful childrearing, and can diminish children’s own self-esteem and ability to forge intimate relationships.

V. Conclusions: Cultural ideology and family structure

As we have seen, in many cultures family violence has been, and continues to be, considered normal, and even desirable. Even now, the study of family violence or nonviolence still focuses primarily on statistical information, on the gathering of data. Only gradually is this area beginning to be the subject of intensive study in its larger social context.

One important aspect that has begun to receive attention thanks to feminist research and more recently to “men’s studies,” is the study of the relationship between stereotypical gender roles and violence. An area that is also beginning to receive more attention in these quarters is the interaction between family violence or nonviolence, personality formation and social structure.

One of the earliest studies in this area was accomplished by the psychologist Else Frenkel-Brunswick (Adorno et al. 1964). This pioneering work showed that children brought up in what Brunswick termed authoritarian families (the dominator model) where corporal punishment and other forms of abuse as well as rigid gender stereotypes were considered normal tended to harbor extreme prejudices and beliefs about the “rightness” of violence from “superiors” to “inferiors.”

More recently, the work of one of the authors (Eisler) has extended this area of inquiry, focusing on the interaction between intimate relations in the private sphere and economic or political relations in the public sphere. Eisler’s work suggests that if a society, or family, orients strongly to the dominator model - in which relations are based primarily on rankings of domination - patterns of violence will be necessary to maintain these rankings. By contrast, in families and societies orienting primarily to the partnership model - where relations are based primarily on linking, with hierarchies of actualization maintained by enabling rather than disabling power - the teaching of empathy, caring, and the exchange of mutual benefits can be central in the socialization process.

There have been a number of different approaches to ending violence against women and children. While at one time acceptance of corporal punishment was featured in most theories of pedagogy, today in the United States there are scientific and political movements against the use of physical punishment with children. Changes in legislation, due to the pressure of organized women’s rights, children’s rights, and other human rights supporting groups, are also of great significance. United Nations Conventions, such as the United Nations Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, are also extremely important developments. Most important is the continuing grassroots action of groups all over the world - from groups working to stop the sex trade of women and girls to groups working against rape, battering of women, child abuse, genital mutilation of female children, and other human rights violations.

One of the most serious and continuing threats to women and children - especially girl children - is the higher valuation of males over females. This feature of so many cultures is characteristic of systems of belief orienting to the "dominator" model. In fact, female offspring are so devalued that according to a recent United Nations report in 1997 at least 60 million girls who would otherwise be expected to be alive are "missing" from various populations as a result of sex-selective neglect and abortions (UNDP Report, 1997).

Today, family violence occurs across different cultures and family structures. The common denominators are the cultural attitudes and the social structure that the family both shapes and is shaped by. It would seem that only fundamental cultural changes and changes in these entrenched social structures - in Eisler's terms, a shift from the dominator to a partnership model of family and social orientation - will make it possible to deal with family violence in a systemic way and to move to nonviolence as the norm in both families and societies worldwide.

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NOTES:

¹ There is movement in this direction; for example, an article in the July issue of the magazine Child featured a story entitled "Is it ever okay to spank your child?" (page 18) addressing this issue.

² An early program is Education for Parenting, started in 1979 by Sally Scattergood and adopted by nine Philadelphia public schools, described in Miedzian, pp. 115-125.

³ See, for example, the work of Froma Walsh, codirector of the Center for Family Health at the University of Chicago, and George Doub and Virginia Morgan Scott, cofounders of the Family Wellness Program in San Jose, California (Topics in Family Psychology and Counseling 1992). The Wellesley College Centers for Women also publish articles on violent and nonviolent, and even more specifically healthy and unhealthy, relations (Swift 1987). And Judith A. Lewis, president of the International Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, has suggested that counselors work with families might "involve encouraging their efforts to replace models of domination and subordination with models of partnership" (Lewis 1994).