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PREVIEW

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Psychological adjustment of children exposed to family violence

Mosca, Valerie Hicks, Psy.D.

Pace University, 1991

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PREVIEW

**Psychological Ajustment of Children
Exposed to Family Violence**

by

Valerie Hicks Mosca

**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology
in the Department of Psychology at Pace University.**

New York

1991

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In acknowledging the generosity of others and the contributions they have made to this research, I begin with the women and children who participated in this project. Their thoughtfulness in describing themselves and their lives and their patience in answering

questions are the foundation upon which this study rests.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Tables.....	vii
List of Figures.....	viii
Abstract.....	ix
I. Introduction.....	1
Theories Underlying Behavioral, Emotional and Social Development	
Causes and Implications of Domestic Violence	
Psychological Correlates and Developmental Consequences of Parent-Child Aggression	
Detrimental Effects of Family Violence on Children	
Intergenerational Transmission of Violence	
II. Purpose of the Study of Children Exposed to Family Violence.....	33
Hypotheses Regarding the Impact of Family Violence on the Child's Behavioral, Emotional, and Social Functioning	
Contributions and Limitations of the Study	

III.	Method.....	39
	Selection of Subjects	
	Procedures Used in Conducting the Study	
	Instruments Used to Collect Data	
IV.	Results.....	57
	Demographic Information	
	Responses on the Various Scales	
V.	Discussion.....	84
	Perception of Behavior Problem by Mothers	
	Feelings of Anxiety and Aggression Reported by Children	
	Coping Strategies Used by Children	
	References.....	113
	Appendices.....	128
	A. Consent Form	
	B. Demographic Information Form	
	C. Conflict Tactics Scale	
	D. Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale	
	E. Child Behavior Checklist	
	F. Depression Self-Rating Scale	
	G. Revised Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale	
	H. Roberts Apperception Test	

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
Table 1.	Demographic Characteristics of Violent Families.....	59
Table 2.	T-Scores on Child Behavior Profile for Boys and Girls From Violent and Non-Violent Families.....	62
Table 3.	Group Means and Standard Deviations of Measures of Aggression, Anxiety, and Depression.....	66
Table 4.	T-Scores on Roberts Apperception Test for Children From Violent and Non-Violent Families.....	70
Table 5.	Summary of Results.....	72
Table 6.	Conflict Tactics Scale Scores Indicating Prevalence of Violence Between Parents.....	74
Table 7.	Parent-Child Conflict Scale Scores Indicating Prevalence of Violence Between Parent and Child or Child's Sibling.....	76
Table 8.	t-Test Comparison of Children From Violent Families by Low and High Degree of Violence.....	78
Table 9.	Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Roberts Apperception Test Variables: Witness, Abused-Witness, and Control Group.....	80

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
Figure 1. Comparison of Instruments.....	45

PREVIEW

ABSTRACT

The major purpose of this study was to investigate the personality characteristics of children exposed to family violence. Clinical data indicates that these children may be prone to a variety of symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, and aggression, which may not be readily apparent to either parent or clinician.

This research examined the effects of family violence by comparing children from violent families and children from non-violent families on a variety of measures to assess their behavioral, social, and psychological adjustment. The results indicated that children from violent families demonstrated significantly more behavior problems and had less social interaction than children from non-violent families as reported by their mothers. According to mother-reports and self-reports there was no significant difference on measures of anxiety, depression, and aggression. However, the Robert's

Apperception Test for Children, a projective test, indicated significant differences between children from violent families and the comparison group on anxiety and aggression. While mean scores for depression were higher on all measures (mother-reports, self-reports, projective test), they were not significant. Finally, children from violent families were found to be significantly less able to utilize adaptive coping skills than children from non-violent families. Children from violent families were able to identify problem situations, but relied on atypical responses and maladaptive responses or left problems unresolved significantly more often than children from the comparison group.

Thus, significant differences between children exposed to family violence and the comparison group were found on psychosocial variables of behavior problems and social interactions, feelings of anxiety and aggression, and use of adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. What seems most important to consider when assessing these children is the discrepancy between their outward

and their inner concerns. Early evaluation and treatment of these children are seen as important interventions to minimize the effects of living in a violent family and interrupt the intergenerational cycle of violence. Since early case finding is of particular importance school and community agency personnel should be trained regarding possible signs and symptoms of family violence.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the personality characteristics of children exposed to family violence and examine the impact of family violence on their psychological functioning and socio-emotional development. The psychological adjustment of children who witnessed physical violence between their parents was compared to the adjustment of children from non-violent families. The aspects of psychological adjustment examined included: behavioral, social, and emotional. Several factors within each of these areas were investigated to assess the relationship between exposure to family violence and subsequent psychological maladjustment. It was also determined whether other factors such as frequency and intensity of abuse were important variables which influenced the child's adjustment. In addition, certain key factors were identified which could be used to develop a personality

profile of the child who has been impacted by family violence.

While there has been considerable research (Elmer, 1977; Oates, Forrest, & Peacock, 1985; Green, 1978a; Kinard, 1979, 1980, 1982) regarding the psychological correlates and treatment needs of abused children, there is considerably less research available regarding the psychological effects on children who witness abuse and a paucity of research regarding children who both witness abuse and are abused themselves. Recent studies (Hershorn and Rosenbaum, 1985; Hughes and Barad, 1983; Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986a; Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985; Wolfe and Mosk, 1983) on the psychological correlates of the effects of marital violence on child witnesses have been sparse and generally done without adequate statistical control. The two studies that have attempted to examine the maladjustment of child victims and witnesses to family violence, have also been limited by inadequate control of subjects.

Jouriles, Barling, and O'Leary (1987) examined the relationships involving interspousal aggression,

parent-child aggression and child behavior problems in children from maritally violent homes. While they found that parent-child aggression related to attention problems, anxiety, motor excess, and conduct problems, they found no significant relationship between witnessing interspousal aggression and child behavior problems. The results of this study need to be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size (n=45) and the lack of a control group.

Another recent study (Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, and Zak, 1986b) which compared boys who had witnessed violence between their parents to boys who had been abused by their parents, found both groups had a similar pattern of adjustment problems. While this study used a community comparison group, the groups were uneven and lacked adequate controls. The samples comprised children exposed to family violence, (n=32); children from a child welfare agency who were abused by their parents, (n=18); and the community group, (n=15). There were no controls for the possibility that a number of boys in the abuse sample had also witnessed abuse and

that some of the witnesses and/or community sample had been abused.

The available research indicates a significant association between family violence and children's adjustment problems. Since spouse abuse is seen to be an intergenerational problem (Rosenbaum and O'Leary, 1981a; Roy, 1977; Walker, 1979), living in violent families tends to put these children at greater risk to become involved in violent relationships as adults. It therefore seems critical to consider the specific treatment needs of these children. Assessing these children's needs may be difficult for mental health professionals as their problems are often overshadowed by their parents' conflicts.

The present research examined the personality characteristics of two groups of children: 1) children who witnessed violence between parents and 2) children from non-violent families. These groups were compared to discover similarities and differences in their psychological adjustment and to identify possible mediating variables to maladjustment. Based on these

findings, specific treatment recommendations can be made and distributed to professionals working with this population.

Theoretical Rationale

The available literature and current theory indicates that several dimensions of the child's psychological development are likely to be effected by family violence. For the purpose of this study, these areas of development will be defined as emotional, behavioral, and social. Within these general areas of psychological adjustment the following factors (7) were examined: behavior problems, social competence, anxiety, aggression, depression, adaptive coping skills, and maladaptive coping skills. There are some basic theories underlying the selection of these variables and current research is available which supports investigation of these areas.

Learned Helplessness

Seligman's (1975) theory of learned helplessness offers a psychological rationale to explain why the battered woman becomes a victim, and continues to remain

in the battering situation (Walker, 1977,1978). This theory may also apply to the children from violent families who feel powerless to stop the violent behavior of their parent(s). In Seligman's initial research, when dogs were exposed to noncontingent negative reinforcement and they could not effect what happened to them, their motivation to respond decreased and they became passive and submissive. Seligman and Hiroto (1975) obtained similar findings when they extended this work to human subjects.

Walker (1977) applied learned helplessness to the battered woman. Three basic components were noted: 1) information about what should happen (contingency); 2) cognitive representation about the contingency (learning, expectation, belief, perception); and 3) behavior. Many issues may influence the woman's ability to escape the batterer (i.e. initial tolerance for the abuse when it begins, the choice of a potential abuser as a marital partner, the interpersonal dynamics between the couple that provokes the abuse, etc.). However, whether the woman is actually powerless is not the major

issue. According to Walker (1977), the most important issue is the woman's belief system about her ability to escape the batterer. Repeated battering decreases her motivation to respond, as she can no longer perceive the possibility of success if she acts. Her emotional well-being is threatened at this point, with the emergence of depression and anxiety (Walker, 1977, p.49). When children feel they are helpless to intervene in the violence between their parents and/or the violence toward themselves, they may react with anxiety and depression similar to the learned helplessness experienced by abused women.

In addition, the variable of anxiety in these children is theoretically related to the role of the environment in shaping the dynamics of the personality (Freud, 1959/1926). The environment has the power to produce pain and increase tension. When overwhelmed by the excessive stimulation of pain and tension which the ego is unable to control, the ego becomes flooded with anxiety (Freud, 1959/1926).

Violent families create an environment that produces pain and increases tension. One can speculate that children living in violent homes are constantly fearful of threats of pain and destruction. Their inability to effectively deal with this traumatic anxiety would tend to reduce them to a state of infantile helplessness.

Identification with the Aggressor

Anna Freud (1965) described the phenomenon of identification with the aggressor as, "a child introjects some characteristic of an anxiety object and so assimilates an anxiety experience which he has just undergone" (p.113). Thus, the child is able to transform himself from the person threatened into the person who makes the threat by impersonating the aggressor. This is regarded as a normal way for the ego to resolve conflict with authority or its effort to deal with anxiety objects (Freud, 1965).

The defense mechanism of identification with the aggressor would seem to affect children living in violent homes. Thus, children exposed to family

violence would be expected to demonstrate more aggressive behaviors.

Social Learning Theory

Aggression in these children can also be theoretically related to the social learning theory of modeling (Bandura, 1977). In a study by Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1961) children who had seen an adult model perform aggressive acts, both physical and verbal, were found to be more prone to violent behaviors. The children responded in ways that were exact imitations of the model's behavior.

A model may also influence a child's behavior even when the model is performing a socially deviant behavior. According to Bandura and Walters (1963), situations in which violence is tolerated weakens the child's inhibitions about performing the behavior himself.

A mother and father are probably the most important identification figures in anyone's life and children learn to model both parents. This theory would lead to speculating that children exposed to family violence