

BRIEF REPORT

WHEN PARENTS MODEL VIOLENCE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WITNESSING WEAPON USE AS A CHILD AND LATER USE AS AN ADULT

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ABSTRACT: Studies have demonstrated that witnessing inter-parental violence as a child is related to a number of negative outcomes, including violent and aggressive behavior as an adult (Fantuzzo, DePaola, Lambert, & Martino, 1991; Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 1998; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Some investigators have purported that observational learning is responsible for this perpetuation of violent behavior in families (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). However, existing data is far from conclusive. This short study was designed to address some of the discrepancies. The researchers chose to examine a specific occurrence, weapon use, due to the severity of the behavior. A main intent of this study was to raise questions about the extensive use of weapons in violent families. Participants were 362 male domestic violence offenders court-ordered to undergo assessment of the likelihood of recidivism. Selected items from the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979) were used to assess childhood witnessing and adult engagement in a target violent behavior. A chi-square was performed to examine the relationship between childhood witnessing of a parent's threat or use of a weapon in a domestic violence incident and adulthood threat or use of a weapon against an intimate partner. The relationship was significant. Men who reported witnessing threat or use of a weapon in parental violence were more likely than not to have threatened to use or have actually used a weapon against an intimate partner. Findings also indicate that most men who committed weapon offenses did not report witnessing such in childhood. This raises interesting questions about other factors that may relate to weapon use.

KEY WORDS: domestic violence, weapon use, modeling, observational learning

INTRODUCTION

According to the National Crime Victims Survey, over 700, 000 violent crimes are committed by intimate partners each year (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001). While immense, this estimate does not include the numerous domestic violence incidents that go

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unreported or do not result in an arrest. Between 85% and 95% of these violent offenses are committed by men against women, and approximately half of these victimized women have children who live in their home (US Department of Justice, 2000). Researchers estimate that in any given year, this results in 3.3 million children being exposed to violence against their mothers or female caretakers (American Psychological Association, 1996).

A number of emotional and behavioral problems, including violence and aggression, have been associated with witnessing inter-parental (or intimate partner) abuse as a child (e.g., Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 1998; Henning, Leitenberg, Coffey, Bennett, & Jankowski, 1997; Widom, 1989). However, this body of literature is not entirely uniform. The discrepancies in the results may be attributable to the vast differences in methodology among the various studies, specifically with regards to the criteria used to define witnessing and engaging in violence. This methodological issue is further complicated by the fact that many of these studies include several different forms (e.g., verbal and physical) and sources (e.g., family and community) of violence in a single study.

Observational Learning and Violent Behavior

Researchers have provided a number of hypotheses regarding what accounts for the relationship between witnessing and engaging in violent behavior. For example, investigators have suggested that family members may have a genetic predisposition toward violent behavior, that other factors such as inconsistent or poor parenting are responsible, and/or that observational learning may be occurring. Attempts to validate one or more of these possible explanations have often yielded mixed results. Despite this, evidence of observational learning has continued to mount (e.g., Bandura, 1965; Blumenthal, Neemann, & Murphy, 1998; Gwartney-Gibbs, Stockard, & Bohmer, 1987; Lystad, 1986; Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997; Mihalic & Elliot, 1997; Myers & McGrady, 1997).

Some researchers have suggested that a distinction should be made between generalized and specific modeling (e.g., Kalmuss, 1984). Generalized modeling refers to the idea that violence is acceptable. Specific modeling refers to the perpetration of particular types of aggression the individual was exposed to within his/her family. Examining specific modeling allows for a more explicit test of observational learning. One would hypothesize that if observational learning was the primary mode of transmission, there would be a high correspondence between the particular type of violent behavior that an individual was exposed to as a child and the type of violent behavior he (or she) engages in as an adult. Evidence for specific modeling is mixed (for review, see Stith, Rosen, Middleton, Busch, Lundeberg, & Carlton, 2000).

Current Study

The current study identified a target violent behavior and examined whether individuals who witnessed the target behavior as a child engaged in that same behavior as an adult. The target behavior was using and/or threatening to use a weapon (i.e., gun or knife) against an intimate partner. This single target behavior was used for the following reasons: (a) it eliminated a number of methodological issues regarding defining and assessing violent behavior, (b) it represented a more precise test of observational learning theory, and (c) it was extreme enough to be of practical importance. Furthermore, there were no published studies to date that specifically examined the intergenerational transmission of weapon use.

METHOD

Participants

Data from an initial sample of 1,099 male batterers, court-ordered to receive assessment at a domestic violence assessment center, were screened for inclusion in the analysis. An all male, clinical sample (men referred for assessment) was used to increase the relevance of findings to typically presenting batterers. Participants for whom there were completed responses (either from the perpetrator himself or from the victim and legal records) to questions about the threat or actual use of a weapon met criteria for inclusion. The final sample consisted of data from 362 participants. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 65 ($M = 33$). Eighty-six percent of the sample was African-American, 12% was Caucasian, and 2% was of another race or unreported.

Measures

Witnessing inter-parental weapon threat/use as a child and threat/use of a weapon against an intimate partner as an adult were assessed via selected items from the physical abuse (violence) section of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979). A modified answering and scoring procedure that simplifies the original CTS format was used. Items were rated on a four-point Likert scale, with 0 indicating never, 1 indicating once, 2 indicating two to five times, and 3 indicating six or more times.

Procedure

Four CTS items were extracted from a questionnaire administered at the domestic violence assessment center. Two items assessed whether the offender had (a) threatened his victim with a gun or knife or (b) used a gun or knife in any prior domestic violence offense. Responses to these items were verified by court records. The other two items assessed whether the offender had seen either parent engage in either of these behaviors prior to the age of 16. For ease of comparison, the variables were dichotomized. Any

threat or actual weapon use by either parent was coded as 1. If the offender stated that he had never seen either parent threaten the other with a weapon or use a weapon against the other, the item was coded as 0. The same procedure was completed for the items that assessed whether the offender had engaged in either of these behaviors as an adult.

Results

A chi-square analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between witnessing inter-parental threat or use of a weapon as a child and threatening to use or using a weapon against an intimate partner as an adult. The relationship was significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 362) = 7.46, p < .01$ (See Table 1). However, the effect size was small, $w = .144$. Approximately 7% of the sample reported witnessing a parent threaten to use or actually use a weapon against an intimate partner. Men who did report such witnessing were more likely (83%) than not (17%) to have threatened to use or actually use a weapon against an intimate partner themselves. Findings also indicate, however, that most men who committed weapon offenses did not report witnessing such in childhood. Approximately 10% of the men who threatened and/or used a weapon reported that they had observed those behaviors during childhood.

DISCUSSION

Limitations of this study include the use of analyses that do not establish causality and reliance on self-report data. Although current court records were obtained to verify weapon use, records that would corroborate participants' reports of parental weapon use

TABLE 1. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDHOOD WITNESSING AND ADULTHOOD THREAT/USE OF A WEAPON.

	Threat or Use		
	Yes	No	Total
Witness Threat or Use			
Yes	20 (83%)	4 (17%)	24
No	185 (55%)	153 (45%)	338
Total	205 (57%)	157 (43%)	362

$\chi^2 (1, N = 362) = 7.46, p < .01, w = .144$

were unavailable. An examination of records pertaining to offender childhood history should be conducted in future research investigating the relationship between childhood exposure and current violent behavior. It is possible that responding to the items about personal weapon use influenced responses to items about witnessing such behavior. It is unclear, for example, how justification for personal weapon use might have affected responses to later items about parental use. However, these items were separated and embedded in a much larger set of questionnaires, so it seems reasonable that the degree to which participants related the items is low.

There were statistical concerns as well. The psychometrics of the questionnaire were unknown. Dichotomizing the variables resulted in offenders who witnessed their parent engaging in weapon use on one occasion being included with offenders who witnessed their parent engaging in weapon use on multiple occasions. Data is lost in this process, which lessens statistical power. However, the results were still significant. This is important because it suggests that a child can witness one incident of inter-parental weapon use and he/she may be more likely to engage in this behavior as an adult.

Results provided support for the role of observational learning in weapon threat and use against an intimate partner. Although the magnitude of effects of witnessing weapon use as a child are small, the implications are important due to the severity of the behavior being modeled and the relatively high prevalence of domestic violence. Findings suggest that careful attention should be given to the treatment of children who live in homes where inter-parental violence occurs. Providing these children with adaptive coping and conflict resolution skills may prevent the perpetuation of violence.

However, there were many men who threatened or used a weapon that did not report witnessing inter-parental weapon threat or use. This suggests that other variables, not examined in this study, are implicated in the use of a weapon against an intimate partner. For example, the use of weapons in the social group with which one identifies may be an important factor. A few studies have indicated that observational learning of violent behavior may occur within social networks (Myers & McGrady, 1997). It is also possible that less specific modeling is involved. Additional research is needed to determine the relative importance of these various sources of learning. It is imperative for future research to examine the role of peer influence, societal views of violence, and related factors.

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