

Cycle of Violence - A Harmful Theory

Scottish Women's Aid

Many social workers and other professionals will mention the risks that children will 'grow up like it' as the one thing they 'know' about the impact on children of living with domestic violence, and will refer to the need to prevent violence repeating itself in the future as their primary motivation for becoming involved.

In fact, there is no proof that 'violence breeds violence' since the research in this field is problematic. The fascination with the supposed intergenerational transmission of violence began in the era of Sir Keith Joseph's cycle of poverty' where there was major research investment in misguidedly trying to blame 'problem families' for continually recreating their own misery & disadvantage.

Since then a number of careful reviews of the research literature have appeared which reveal the reality to be far less simple (see for example Pegalow 1984, Chapter 7; Stark & Flitcraft, 1985, pp.151-8; Okun, 1986, pp. 59-63 and 110-2; Kaufman and Zigler, 1987; Widom, 1989.)

The overall conclusion from this work is that empirical studies which have actually compared adult perpetrators or victims with those believed not to fall into these categories do often find some difference in the expected direction, but that the differences tend to be small and the studies flawed and over-deterministic.

The most important thing to remember is always that they are of absolutely no predictive value in individual cases in practice. It is vital, to explain this to families with members who were brought up with violence or who are currently abusive.

**Human beings always have choices, and hence responsibility for their behaviour;
we are not programmed like a machine.**

Far from being predestined to repeat a pattern, people who have lived with abuse not uncommonly have more motivation for avoiding it later in life since they have seen the damage it can inflict.

Reviews of the research on intergenerational transmission have shown to be methodologically flawed. Very often, in the studies on which the claims for a 'cycle' have been founded, percentages of adult perpetrators or adult victims of abuse found to have had violent childhoods will fall below 50%

This means that in many studies, the majority of current abusers and abused women come from backgrounds defined as non-violent so, clearly, some other factor or factors in the past or present must be of more importance. This is almost always true of studies of women so we can virtually discount any notion of a transmitted 'cycle' affecting women.

In studies of men, percentages, though higher on the whole, still vary widely between studies & do not appear conclusive. Other problems are that many studies use samples from clinical populations (i.e. those receiving treatment or help of some kind) so are likely to be unrepresentative, also, the interpretations implied by the men having sought professional help, and by the form that help may be taking affect the responses they give to research questions.

Studies often lack control groups so we cannot claim to have established cause and effect. Those which do have comparison groups tend to find small differences in the predicted direction but remain unable to establish cause and effect with certainty since any number of other factors could be clouding the picture. Furthermore, the research asks people about the past; retrospective data are suspect not only because people may not remember clearly, but because those questioned have had ample time to impose their adult understandings into childhood events.

Most damingly, there is such vagueness in deciding what counts as growing up with abuse that it is impossible to compare one study with another or to say that researchers have clearly divided off an abusive population from one that most of us might fall into.

Different studies include, for example, having experienced severe physical or sexual abuse, routine physical punishment, psychological abuse, physical or emotional neglect, or having witnessed fathers assaulting mothers and/or mothers assaulting fathers, or unspecified 'parental violence'.

Nevertheless, such strong claims are made by researchers that professionals need to exercise an equally firm influence in remembering that human matters are generally far too complex to be explained away with a single theory. For example, Straus et al's claim of 'striking evidence for the idea...that violence by parents begets violence in the next generation' (Straus et al. 1980 pp112-3) depends on data showing that the sons of the most violent parents have a rate of 'wife-beating' of 20 percent compared to 2%(p.101) But this could equally be read as showing that the overwhelming majority from all groups with violent childhoods are not now violent towards their partners.

Stark & Flitcraft 1985 p 157 in fact demonstrate from the Straus et al. findings that 'a current abuser is more than twice as likely to have had a 'non-violent' rather than 'violent' childhood (a ratio of 7-3) and seven times more likely to have come from a 'non-violent' home rather than from a home classified as 'most violent'

Clearly, none of this bears out the thesis that 'the majority of today's violent couples are those who were brought up by parents violent towards each other' (Straus et al., op. cit. p100) and abusive men cannot take refuge in such an assumption - nor in the looseness of language that chooses to write about 'violent couples' rather than 'violent men. Therapy & couples counselling are dangerous if they encourage men to focus on their family of origin or on current family dynamics as a supposed explanation for their violence; this gives them the perfect excuse for denying responsibility for their violence.

Re-educational men's groups which confront violence using a 'feminist analyses consequently will not allow family of origin work in group time; it has to be under-taken in separate therapy or counseling.

The 'cycle of violence' tries to blame family influences alone rather than a social context which is ineffective in tackling abuse and which in much media and popular portrayal, still actively condones the abuse of male power.

WHAT I THINK

People might think that because my dad is violent
that I'll end up just the same as him.

No way.

I'm not my dad's shadow
and I'm not his echo.

Violent people choose to be violent.
I could never treat anyone
the way my dad treated my mum.

by Mark

The following text was taken from:
Making an Impact - children & domestic violence:

Some of the problems of relying on a 'cycle of violence' concept are noted here:
It allows abusers to blame someone else for their violence e.g. their parents, instead of tasking responsibility for their own behaviour. Most abusers do this, which is why so much of the research 'proves' the concept.

It denies & ignores the experiences of so many adults, both men and women who, having witnessed/experienced domestic violence are utterly determined never to let violence be part of their lives and do not use or condone it.

There is no known research tracking a large and representative cross-section of child witnesses of domestic violence into adulthood to see what proportions of child witnesses do grow up to use or experience violence. Instead, much of the research is carried out with adults who are known to be violent. Even if all of them (say that they) have witnessed violence as children, this only demonstrates a correlation, not a causal link.

The concept denies the individuality of each developing child and his/her potential to learn from experience. It ignores the possibility of changing behavior. If support is only offered to children who have experienced domestic violence on the basis that they are potential abusers, it gives children (and their mothers) the message that only abusers get help. If aggressive/loud behavior is assumed to be a sign of children fulfilling this concept, it could be failing to identify possible child abuse. Some people can & do use aggression as a way of expressing how angry & hurt they are about abuse.