

Research Review

Family Violence and Violence Against Children

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Introduction

Even as recently as ten to 15 years ago the student of family violence could probably fit most of the key texts into a reasonably sized bookcase. The field is now so large that keeping up with the burgeoning literature is a full-time task that few must be able to accomplish. 'Family violence' as a topic is a huge one, including a vast literature on violence against children and on violence against adult women, and a smaller (though growing) literature on violence against men. It includes violence by and against spouses, lovers, siblings, parents, and children, and takes in not only physical violence, but also sexual and psychological violence. In disciplinary terms, though sociology, criminology and social psychology have dominated the field, the family violence research base includes contributions from medicine, ethology, behavioural genetics, social anthropology and social history to name but a few.

This inevitably partial and selective review is restricted to highlighting some of the key themes in recent research on one aspect of family violence—physical violence to children—but indicates where relevant the overlaps between studies in this area and studies of other types of family violence. By physical violence is meant any act carried out intentionally, with a reasonable probability of causing pain or injury, a definition which encompasses both 'normal' violence—that is, physical, power-assertive disciplinary tactics commonly used by parents in Western countries such as smacking, slapping, spanking and so forth; and 'abusive' violence, that which is considered to exceed a level of force acceptable to prevailing community norms and standards.

In particular, three main questions are posed:

- what does recent research tell us about the incidence and prevalence of violence against children,
- what have been the key themes in recent research on causes, correlates and consequences of violence to children, and
- what should a future research agenda focus on, with prevention in mind?

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The dangerous family: recent prevalence and incidence data

The United Nations convention on the rights of the child (Article 9) lays great stress on the rights of children to family life. The apparently underlying assumption is that having a family is usually a good thing, yet statistically speaking, the family is probably one of the most dangerous places a person can be. Moreover, the smaller and less powerful you are, the more dangerous it becomes. Home Office statistics for England and Wales show that 57 per cent of all homicides occur in the home, and that 21 per cent of (adult) male and 68 per cent of female homicides are committed by spouses, lovers or other family members. Babies under one year are the most at risk of homicide of all age groups (Home Office, 1997), and it is estimated that somewhere between 60 and 70 children per year are killed by their parents (more than one child a week). Local authority returns show that in 1997 there were over 32,000 children on the Child Protection Register, of which just over a third were considered to be at risk of physical injury (Department of Health, 1997).

However, official statistics, compiled from cases known to and recorded by the authorities, reveal only the extreme tip of a very large iceberg. Self-report data gathered from community-based studies suggest that the hidden incidence and prevalence of family violence, particularly against children, is substantial. Once again, the trends in the data show that the smaller you are, the more you are at risk. For example, self-report studies show that whilst adults in the family are certainly violent to one another—for example in England and Wales 23 per cent of women and 15 per cent of men aged 16 to 59 report having been assaulted by a current or former partner at some point in their lives (Mirrlees-Black, 1999)—they are even more violent towards children. Though at the time of writing we lack up-to-date, robust United Kingdom (UK) data on the prevalence (lifetime occurrence) and incidence (rate per annum) of parental violence towards children, in a recent community study of 400 families with children aged between one and 11 years old in two areas of south east England, Nobes and Smith (1997) report that the use of physical forms of punishment is extremely widespread, not to say universal. Ninety nine per cent of children in that study were reported as having been physically punished at some time by one or both of their parents, and 92 per cent had been physically punished in the past year. In terms of the degree of violence, using an interviewer-rated assessment of severity based on type of punishment, level of force used and likelihood of physical or psychological harm, the researchers concluded that 21 per cent of both mothers and fathers had used punishments rated as 'severe' on their children at some point. Implements of various kinds (slippers, wooden spoons, belts) had been used to hit children by around 14 per cent of parents.

UK versus international rates of parental violence

How does the UK compare to other countries? The answer is that we cannot say. Despite a proliferation of international research on violence against children, it is surprisingly difficult to compare data from one nation to another, because studies often use widely differing methodologies. Samples (parents, children, young adults), data collection methods (telephone, self-completion, interviewer-administered) and operational definitions of 'mild' and 'severe' violence all vary substantially, and whilst some report broad prevalence data, others give incidence data but no prevalence statistics. There are indicators, however, that in the UK, parents may be particularly violent to their children.

The comparisons are especially marked in the case of Scandinavia, where family policy is particularly child-centred. In Sweden, for example, where corporal punishment of children by parents has been prohibited under a civil code since 1979, only one third of children in a 1994 prevalence survey of 13–15 year olds reported having received physical punishment from a parent before their teenage years (quoted in Durrant, 1999). The same study reports that in the last decade, just one child has died at the hands of parents as a result of physical abuse. In Finland, where corporal punishment was prohibited in the early 1980s, rates reported by children are higher but still not as high as those reported by parents in the UK; in 1992, Sariola and Uutela reported that in a sample of 9,000 15 year olds, 72 per cent said that they had been physically punished to some degree by parents at some point before the age of 14, and 8 per cent reported that they had been the victim of severe violence (defined as hitting with a fist, kicking or the use of implements or weapons). Incidence rates for the year preceding the survey were reported as 19 per cent and 5 per cent respectively (Sariola and Uutela, 1992). In the United States (US) where societal rates of violence are much higher than in the UK (US Senate Judiciary Committee, 1991), and corporal punishment is still legal (as in the UK), the most recent general population surveys indicate that around eight in ten parents have used corporal punishment at some point in child rearing and 61 per cent report using it over a 12 month period (Straus and others, 1998). In that study, 5 per cent of parents self-reported having used methods of punishment classified by the authors as ‘severe physical assault’—acts with a high probability of causing injury—in the previous 12 months. No lifetime prevalence data were cited, but previous studies in the US have cited lifetime prevalence rates of approximately 8 per cent for some of the more dangerous forms of violence against children (Straus and others, 1980). These rates are lower than those reported for the UK, although the differences may be an artefact of methodology rather than real. However, a study in progress for the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Violence Research Programme¹ will soon provide results using a methodology that will allow comparison with these data, and should provide a more reliable estimate of how UK rates of violence against children in the home compare with those in the US.

Causes and correlates of family violence

Research into the causes and correlates of physical violence against children has become increasingly multidisciplinary over the last 40 years, so that there has been a gradual move away from a predominantly medical, psycho-pathological model of ‘child abuse as disease’, by way of sociology, social anthropology, ethology, and social psychology to what is today a more sophisticated, multifactorial model of the explanations for violence against children. Prominent in contemporary writing on physical child maltreatment has been the ‘ecological’ perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Belsky, 1980) which offers a way of integrating different disciplinary approaches, by understanding violence as a multiply-determined phenomenon, in which the child and family are viewed as part of a nested system of risk factors and protective factors at the socio-cultural, community, family and individual levels. This model is now widely regarded as one of the most useful approaches to empirical and theoretical work on child maltreatment and has significantly advanced the field over the past few years.

¹ ‘Parents, Children and Discipline’, a study of 1,200 parents across Britain by the National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), the Policy Research Bureau and the National Centre for Social Research.

Socio-cultural explanations

At the socio-cultural level, many writers have suggested that by its very nature, the Western model of family is an inherently violence-prone institution. Although idealised by functional sociologists from the 1950s onwards as a place of nurturance and security (for example, Parsons and Bales, 1955), later commentators (for example, Straus and Hotaling, 1979) have theorised that ironically, the same factors that enable the family to be a warm, supportive and caring environment for its members also combine to make it a dangerous one. Briefly summarised, the main factors that have been hypothesised as implicated are:

- Opportunity, time at risk, breadth and intensity of involvement: family members spend large amounts of time together;
- Impinging activities: in the family, conflicts of interest are almost inevitable since relatively scarce resources and facilities must be shared by all, and interests may not necessarily coincide;
- Ascribed roles, and the right to influence: the family is divided along lines of age and sex which bring with them ascribed roles within a hierarchical, frequently patriarchal, and often fundamentally inequitable structure;
- Involuntary membership and extensive knowledge of social biographies: we cannot choose the families we are born into, and being in a family involves commitment and even entrapment of all sorts: personal, material, emotional, legal;
- Stress: all families are prone to stress, if only because they are constantly undergoing change and transitions. Stresses such as poverty also impact particularly keenly within the family. Moreover, stress within the family is transmissible; the stress felt by one will reflect on all;

And finally, but perhaps most importantly from the point of view of family violence:

- Privacy: the family is an inherently private institution, protected from the gaze of the wider society. In its modern, nuclear form, it may be isolated even from the influence of other extended family members. Within the family, therefore, the rules of the wider society may be broken with relative impunity; put another way, where privacy is high, the degree of social control will be low (Gelles, 1983).

Other socio-cultural explanations for family violence have highlighted the 'normative ambiguity' of the family as an institution. The norms that encourage us to have regard for the well-being of other family members also tolerate a certain level of mistreatment, particularly where children are concerned. Straus (1994) and Graziano (1994) have both written convincingly on the concept of 'cultural spillover' as an explanatory factor in family violence, suggesting that where cultural norms tolerate or even endorse interpersonal violence in intimate relationships (for example, corporal punishment in response to child misbehaviour), a level of 'spillover' into non-legitimate violence is fostered, since the line between discipline and abuse is frequently blurred (Whipple and Richey, 1997).

Family and individual level explanations

At the family and individual level, a dominant theme in recent research has been the intergenerational transmission of family violence. We now have strong evidence pointing to at least some intergenerational continuities in family violence (Simons and others, 1991; Hemenway and others, 1994; Kaufman and Zigler, 1987) but we do not yet clearly

understand the mechanisms by which children from violent homes may grow into violent adults. Crucially, though having been the victim of violence in childhood appears substantially to increase the risk of becoming a violent adult, it is also clear that there is no straightforward path between childhood experiences and adult outcomes. As Zigler and Hall wrote in 1989, 'the theory of intergenerational transmission has never been adequately substantiated and there is mounting evidence that the 'cycle of abuse' can be, and frequently is, broken.' Empirical studies have given rise to a number of competing (or complementary?) theories to explain the observed continuities in family violence. These include:

- social learning (that the observation or experience of violence in childhood promotes a tendency to respond aggressively to stress and to use violence as a tool for problem-solving; Bandura, 1977; Burgess and Youngblade, 1988);
- maladaptive social information processing style (that children who are harshly punished have a tendency to misinterpret the behaviours and motivations of others as hostile and provocative, and are hence more likely to respond aggressively to stress themselves; Dodge and others, 1990; Weiss and others, 1992);
- on the other hand, attribution theory (how individuals process their experiences cognitively mediates the extent to which they will repeat parental behaviours with their own children; Hemenway and others, 1994) has provided some theoretical basis to account for discontinuities between the generations (see for example Creighton and Russell, 1995).

The relationship between abuse and 'normal' violence: thresholds for harm

A natural outgrowth of the ecological perspective on child maltreatment has been the increasing interest in viewing physical child maltreatment against the context of normative parenting practices. Researchers who have studied violence in community populations as opposed to clinical ones (Straus and others, 1980; Weiss and others, 1992; Simons and others, 1991) have long argued that parental violence against children has to be viewed in terms of a spectrum of behaviour. Part of the impetus for focusing on 'normal' or 'sub-abusive' violence (Graziano and others, 1996) as well as 'abusive' violence has been an increasingly complex and heated debate about the thresholds for harm of parental violence against children. There is now a large body of evidence demonstrating the associations between experiencing harsh parenting at home, and poor outcomes for children in terms of psycho-social development. We know for example that children who experience severe violence are at greater risk of delayed or impaired physical and neurological development (Famularo and others, 1992; Lewis and others, 1989); emotional and conduct disorders (Widom, 1989; Aber and others, 1989; Weiss and others, 1992); poor educational attainment (Salzinger and others, 1984); lower IQ (Smith and Brooks-Gunn, 1997); psychopathology, including post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Kolko, 1992; Bifulco and Moran, 1998); and anti-social behaviour, substance misuse and offending (Lewis and others, 1989; Gelles and Straus, 1995; Dembo and others, 1993). What we do not yet know is where the thresholds for harm lie. Some researchers have claimed a clear 'dose-response' effect is to be found (Straus and others, 1997) suggesting that *all* parental violence, irrespective of the degree of severity or the frequency, carries a risk of poor outcomes for children. Thus, though the severest violence is associated with the worst outcomes, even mild violence

may have deleterious effects to some lesser extent. Others claim equally vigorously that such conclusions go beyond the existing data, and suggest that the context of the wider family environment, and parenting style and affect, can mediate the potentially deleterious effects of violence (Darling and Steinberg, 1993; Larzelere, 1996; Baumrind, 1996; Gunnoe and Mariner, 1997), and have posited that the age of the child, sex, ethnicity and family structure may all play a part in mediating the effects. Parental warmth in particular appears to play an important, but as yet unclear role; whilst high warmth may not necessarily mitigate the negative effects of parental violence (Straus and others, 1997; Smith and Brooks-Gunn, 1997), low warmth does appear to exacerbate them (Smith and Brooks-Gunn, 1997; see also Simons and others (1994), who found that lack of parental warmth, rather than harsh discipline per se, explained poor adolescent outcomes). This debate looks set to dominate future studies in the field, and more conclusive evidence about the thresholds for harm is imperative if we are to better understand how (and when) to target preventive work with families.

Future research agenda

There are still many gaps in our map of the causes and consequences of family violence, and significantly, the UK has lagged behind the international research community (especially the US), particularly in terms of documenting the prevalence and incidence of different forms of violence in the general population. However, national prevalence data are at last beginning to come on stream in the UK. The NSPCC will shortly publish the results of a large national survey of the prevalence of child maltreatment drawing on self-report data from young adults (Cawson and others, 2000 forthcoming); and a large scale study of the general population of parents is currently underway as part of the ESRC Violence Research Programme to establish the first prevalence and incidence rates of a wide range of disciplinary tactics used by parents, including physically violent ones. What will be critical is that surveys of this kind are repeated over time: the lack of trend data on incidence, and of longitudinal data on outcomes, severely impedes our ability to devise effective preventive services. Large scale longitudinal studies would also allow us to put some of the competing theories of the aetiology and outcomes of violence against children to the test, and the future research agenda should address this as a matter of priority. We also need to understand much more about the thresholds for harm, and how parental behaviours and parenting style may interact to influence outcomes for children.

Finally, future research also needs to unpick the links between physical violence and other types of child maltreatment. The overlap between, for example, physical abuse and emotional or psychological maltreatment has long been recognised, but researchers have lacked the means to measure these different phenomena in a sensitive way. We have thus been limited in our ability to disentangle the relative contributions of differing forms of abuse to negative outcomes for children, to understand the different causal pathways involved, and to specify more precisely the mechanisms that might explain the associations observed in terms of intergenerational continuities. New work on defining and measuring different types of abuse (Moran and others, 1999 unpublished paper) shows promise in advancing the field in this respect.

Conclusions

The field of family violence research is now a huge one internationally, drawing in contributions from a wide range of disciplines and developing increasingly sophisticated approaches to mapping the incidence of violence and exploring its causes, correlates and consequences. The US has lead the field, and though research has made huge strides in the UK in the past five years or so, we still lack a sound national evidence base. US culture is rather different from our own, and the extent to which we can take it for granted that evidence gathered in the US holds true for the UK is debatable. This argues for much more active development of a UK-specific evidence base, which is especially important in terms of developing effective treatment and prevention.

Still, things are improving. Increased willingness on the part of funders to cover the costs of large scale and long-term research studies, and a clear interest by policy makers in the causes, consequences and, critically, the *costs*, of family violence all suggest that we are moving closer to having more robust data from which to develop a better understanding of the phenomena. Moreover, as the technologies for carrying out empirical research develop (for example the widespread use of computer assisted personal or self interviewing), it is becoming increasingly possible to explore these sensitive and intimate aspects of family life in a scientifically rigorous way. Nevertheless, this is an area of study that is fraught with political sensitivity, and these sensitivities sometimes interfere with the process of free and rational debate. It sometimes appears that a lot of what is promulgated about family violence is opinion, rather than knowledge based, so that it becomes hard to sort the evidence from the ideology. As Gelles has put it: 'the study of family violence is often governed more by the heart than by the head ... rational thought and logic ... are often left behind' (Gelles, 1995, p. 18). With the publication of the recent government consultation paper on physical punishment of children² we are approaching a significant point in UK child care policy. It remains to be seen to what extent research evidence rather than political and ideological opinion can influence the direction in which this policy now goes.

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²Protecting children, supporting parents: a consultation document on the physical punishment of children. Department of Health, 2000.

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