

EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE
OUTSIDE THE FAMILY

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While it serves as a useful guide to practice, the concept of working with "the person-in-the-environment" is to some degree inconclusive about choosing among multiple environmental factors or influences. In the area of spousal battering, for example, we tend to focus primarily on the family as the environment in which such behavior is learned. While Bandura (1962) has demonstrated that violent behavior can be a potent learning message in non-family environments as well, the implications of this approach have not been widely recognized or discussed in the traditional social work literature on batterers and wife abuse.

Traditional sources in the spouse abuse literature attribute the batterers behavior to intergenerational familial learning (Straus, 1978; Martin, 1976; Flynn, 1977; Steinmetz, 1980). In fact, researchers attribute as much as 50-80% of all battering behavior to intergenerational familial social learning of the violence (Coleman, 1980; Star, 1980; Gondolf, 1983; Carlson, 1977; Owen and Straus, 1975; Roy, 1982; Dutton and Fehr 1983; Brisson, 1981). Regardless of the exact amount, it is entirely possible that much or all of the remaining 20-50% may be learned in non-familial environments.

In fact, it is entirely possible that a male who inflicts physical violence on his wife or girlfriend may never have been exposed to similar behavior by any member of his family. A child could be exposed to and learn violent behavior in a number of non-family environments, and adapt and generalize this behavior as an adult into intimate, personal relationships. It may be the case that many children that have been exposed to violence in the family learn to imitate either aggressive or violent behavior (Martin and Westra, 1980, p. 42) in non-family environments, such as school or in peer groups, Floyd (1985) and carry this behavior into their adult life (Rosenbaum and O'leary, 1981, p 693) .

Floyd (1985) asserts that children who are bullies at school tend to be abused at home and use violence as a way to identify with the aggressor (p 11). Conversely, children not exposed to violence in the family may learn aggressive or

violent behavior from non-family environments such as school or peer environments and generalize this behavior in their adult life as well. Children who have not been exposed to violence in the home environment may learn in non-family environments that violence is a useful method of gaining dominance or control over a person or situation. Is it not possible that children who are victims of violence in non-family environments may learn, likewise, to identify with the aggressor?

It is important, therefore, in social work, to develop a complete, well-rounded approach to abusive behavior; and that we expand our view of the ways in which abusive behavior is learned to include the effects of violent behavior learned in non-family environments. This is particularly important if we are to develop different interventions, and in particular, if we hope to engage in preventative activity with high risk populations.

There have been various studies and newspaper articles which focus attention on the effects of non-family exposure to violence on childhood and teenage populations. Bandura (1962) demonstrated that young children may be taught to use violent/aggressive behavior in response to frustration when this tactic was demonstrated by adult models, cartoons and violence in movies. Kniveton (1986) demonstrated that students observing peer violence were likely to imitate, adapt, modify and include these behaviors as part of their own repertoire. In addition, children exposed to aggressive peer models would imitate these behaviors regardless of whether or not they were exposed to constructive non-violent models. He also found that the more one is exposed to violent and aggressive peer models the more likely one is to select and use violent and aggressive behaviors; and that the amount of violence one is exposed to may influence how violently that person will behave (p 115).

Alex Kotlowitz, writer for the Wall Street Journal in Oct. 1987, wrote on the experiences of children exposed to violence in the inner-city of Chicago. In this article he noted that these children may demonstrate a number of symptoms similar to those of Vietnam veterans. In fact, he cited a program in California that treated inner-city children for post-traumatic-stress disorders as a result of that exposure. Upon my review of his article, I noted that these children seemed to demonstrate characteristics similar to those of children exposed to violence between parental models or children who are physically abused by their parents. Such symptoms include aggressive behavior, passivity, developmental delays and depression. The thrust of Kotlowitz's observations and account of these childrens

experiences is that they are in an environment that promotes, demonstrates and justifies the use of violence. Moreover, many children may imitate what they have witnessed, over time.

Bullock, Reilly, and Donahue (1983) note that investigations, such as the "Violent School-- Safe School Study (1978)" reports that not only children but also teachers are victims of violence in the school (p. 41). Nuttall and Kalesnik (1987) state that based on their "review of the literature, very few article in the last twenty years deal specifically with counseling victims of personal violence (p. 372)." Although these studies indicate that victims are affected by the violence, they do not indicate how they respond to this experience. Specifically, if victims retaliated by using violence to respond to the violence he or she has experienced; either as a way to protect or defend oneself or as a new learned behavior. Perhaps if victims don't respond to violence from school or with peers through using violence as adolescents perhaps they may respond as adults.

Review of the literature reveals that no studies have compared abusers with non-abusers on this vitally important question of social learning environments.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The study reported on in this paper involves a comparison of the childhood exposure to violence of a sample of male batterers and a control group of non-batterers. The study explores how groups perceived violent experiences as observer, victim or participant. Roy (1982) reports that 81% of batterers have either witnessed or have been abused as a child (p. 29). Owen and Straus (1975) found that those individuals who committed violence, observed violence or were victims of violence, as children, tended to approve of the use of violence as a tactic to resolve conflict and obtain control in face-to-face situations (p. 209). I have included the three roles of participator, observer, and victim of violence in this study due to the fact that exposure to violent environments exist when the acts of violence occur; and the acts of violence occur in all three roles. It was expected that batterers would perceive greater involvement in all three roles than non-batterers.

I suggest that, a violent social learning environment is an environment in which one is exposed to violent behaviors either directly or indirectly as well as the attitudes and conditions that promote these behaviors. Potentially, one exposed to such an environment may interpret, adapt and

generalize such behaviors, cues, and information in order to meet his needs. In this investigation violent social learning environments refers to environments where the acts of pushing, shoving, grabbing, slapping, kicking, choking, scratching, jerking, twisting, biting, hitting, throwing something at someone, threatening or using a knife or gun on someone, or beating someone up occurs.

In addition, the study examined the impact upon batterers of contiguous reinforcing environments--that is, combinations of multiple non-family and family environments that may have influenced the social learning of the batterer. Regarding non-family environments, school and friends environments were measured separately then together in order to delineate the respondents degree of exposure to violent acts in 'each' of his "non-family environments" and in his "total non-family environment." School environments include elementary, junior high, and high school experiences. Friends environments include peers one regularly associated with, peers who were in the same clubs, or peers who lived in the same neighborhood. Regarding family environments, the respondents degree of exposure to violent acts among parents and among siblings was measured, first, separately and then together, in order to obtain an total measure of "family environments." Parents environments included parental models such as mother, father, stepmother, stepfather, mother's boyfriend, father's girlfriend, grand mother, grandfather and the like. Sibling environments included brothers, sisters, stepbrothers, stepsisters or the like.

The study also examined the influences of gender socialization. The literature generally identifies males as more violent and abusive than females (David, David and Brannon, 1976; Epstein and Taylor, 1967; Bandura, 1962; Cicone and Ruble, 1978). Spouse abuse literature likewise identifies the male parental role models as demonstrating the most violence (Martin, Martin and Westra, 1980, p. 42). The present study examined the consistency of these findings between the two groups and in both environments.

METHODOLOGY

The sample for this study consisted of 40 respondents: 20 batterers and 20 non-batterers. Respondents were obtained from the Second Step Program in Pittsburgh, PA; and from the Beaver County, PA branch of Catholic Charities of the diocese of Pittsburgh. Ten of the non-batterers were members of the Pittsburgh's Men's Collective, an organization dedicated to discussing self-growth and changing roles of males in our society, and the other ten non-batterers were selected by the batterers. In order to assure compliance from the

respondents and separate the batterers from the non-batterers, each respondent was asked to identify on the questionnaire which behaviors he had ever used with a any girlfriend(s) or wife (wives). These behaviors ranged from non-violent to violent behavior. If a non-battering respondent indicated that he had used any of the violent behaviors, he was placed in the batterers group.

The purpose of this method of selection was to get the best match possible for this non-probability sample. The groups were comparably matched in terms of education, occupations, employment, sex, and age.

The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), developed by Murray Straus (1979), was used to measure the degree of exposure to violence in both family environments and non-family environments. Regarding experiences as victim, observer, and participant of violence a simple five point Likert scale was used.

The method used to analyze the data comparing the two groups was the T-Test.

RESULTS

The results of this study demonstrate that batterers tended to be significantly more exposed to violence in non-family environments than non-batterers, particularly, in friends environment (refer to Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1.
Subject's Combined Non-family Exposure to Violence

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t</u>	p= .027
Batterers	230.6000	58.592	2.31	
Non-batterers	192.2500	45.847		

***Significant at the .05 level

Table 2.
Subject's Exposure to Violence Among Friends

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t</u>	p=.023
Batterers	111.1000	34.545	2.37	
Non-batterers	89.6000	21.281		

***Significant at the .05 level

However, the batterers in this study did not significantly differ from non-batterers with respect to exposure to violence in family environments, although the means were in the expected direction.

Batterers also tended to participate in violence in non-family environments significantly more than did non-batterers, again this centered more in friends environment (refer to tables 3 and table 4).

Table 3.
Subject's Perceptions about Participating in Violence in Combine Non-Family Environments

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t</u>	p=.031
Batterers	4.9500	2.064	2.26	
Non-batterers	3.7500	1.164		

***Significant at the .05 level

Table 4.
Subject's Perceptions about Participating in Violence in Friends Environments

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t</u>	p=.036
Batterers	2.4500	1.191	2.17	
Non-batterers	1.8000	0.616		

***Significant at the .05 level

Further, batterers tended to feel more like victims in both family and non-family environments particularly with parents, siblings, and school environments.

Table 5.
Subject's Perceptions about being a Victim in Combine Family Environments

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t</u>	p=.006
Batterers	5.3000	1.720	2.94	
Non-batterers	3.7000	1.720		

***Significant at the .05 level

Table 6.
Subject's Perceptions about being a Victim
in Parent's Environments

	Mean	SD	t	p=.010
Batterers	2.7500	1.164	2.71	
Non-batterers	1.8500	.933		

***Significant at the .05 level

Table 7.
Subject's Perceptions about being a Victim in
Sibling's Environments

	Mean	SD	t	p=.041
Batterers	2.5500	1.099	2.12	
Non-batterers	1.8500	0.988		

***Significant at the .05 level

Table 8.
Subject's Perceptions about being a Victim in Combine
Non-Family Environments

	Mean	SD	t	p=.021
Batterers	5.2000	2.191	2.41	
Non-batterers	3.9000	1.021		

***Significant at the .05 level

Table 9.
Subject's Perceptions about being a Victim in School
Environments

	Mean	SD	t	p=.015
Batterers	2.7500	1.164	2.59	
Non-batterers	2.0000	0.562		

***Significant at the .05 level

Batterers tended not to differ from non-batterers in relationship to observing violence either in family or non-family environments. Finally, both batterers and non-batterers identified males as the gender modeling violence in all of the various environments, particularly in non-family environments.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE:

The findings of the present study point to the possibility that non-family exposure to violence, particularly in friends environment, provide batterers with the most potential to obtain social learning messages about the use of violence. As a result, this study suggests that there is potential good in expanding the present view of social learning and spouse abuse to include non-family environments.

Further, batterers tend to feel like victims in every environment except among their friends. Maybe the lesson learned by batterers was that in order not to be victimized in one's interpersonal environment one should use violence. Such a message is then readily adapted and generalized to intimate relationships with a wife or girlfriend. Thus, the batterer behaves in what appears to him to be a powerful manner as exemplified by the male models in the various social learning environments.

The findings of this study suggest some ways of dealing with violence before it occurs. They suggest that preventative interventions should be taken to alter social learning.

In particular, the findings regarding the critical role of friend's environment, bear close examination for their practice implications. It might be useful, for example, to consider creative interventions not only to tap into the friends network but also to tap into other environments where males are clustered. Such as, promoting discussion about the potential negative affects of violence in school environments; for example, health classes, or athletic programs.

Likewise, it might also be useful to discuss the negative effects of violence in neighborhood groups, parks and recreation, boys clubs and boy scouts to name a few. In addition to programs discussing the problem, perhaps it would be useful to develop programs focused on working with those individuals who participate and/or are victims of peer

violence or those who just feel like victims in order to help them both recover from the primary solution and to resolve conflict.

CONCLUSION:

Violent behavior is not learned only in family environments. Peers, friends, and other non-familial environments are also of critical importance in learning violence. This study of samples of batterers and non-batterers found, that while batterers and non-batterers had been exposed to family violence in approximately equal degree, that batterers were significantly more exposed to violence in non-family environments than non-batterers. This appears to suggest that batterers may, in fact, learn battering behavior outside the family.

If so, there are important possibilities for interventions with batterers in peer, friendship, neighborhood and other group settings which need to be developed.

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