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Toward A More Comprehensive Understanding of Interpersonal Violence: Introduction to The Special Issue on Interconnections Among Different Types of Violence

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The landscape of violence scholarship today is dotted with silos. Research on each particular form of violence, abuse, and maltreatment has developed in relative isolation and has built its own set of theories, empirical findings, and approaches to intervention and prevention. However, recent work on the co-occurrence of victimization and perpetration indicates that most, if not all, forms of interpersonal violence are intercorrelated

(see Hamby & Grych, in press). Exposure to maltreatment and violence in childhood significantly raises the risk for both perpetration and victimization across a range of contexts (e.g., Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Holt, 2009; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2008), and individuals who experience violence in one domain typically experience it in at least one other (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009). Although specialization in the field of violence has had its benefits—it has promoted focused, programmatic attention to problems of great significance for public health and personal well-being—it also has significant costs. Studying various forms of interpersonal violence separately has led to the repeated reinvention of theoretical and methodological wheels, restricted progress in understanding why some people are at greater risk for perpetrating and/or being victimized by violence, and constrained our ability to prevent and intervene in a variety of types of violence.

Recognizing the interconnections among multiple forms of violence has significant implications for research and practice. For etiological models of interpersonal violence to be accurate, it will be critical to understand which forms of abuse, maltreatment, and trauma are most closely linked and why. Similarly, for prevention and intervention programs to be effective, they will need to account for the fact that most victims and perpetrators of one form of violence have been victims or perpetrators in other contexts. Achieving a more comprehensive understanding of the topography of interpersonal violence, therefore, will require new research that explores the links between particular forms of violence and explains how they develop and proliferate.

The purpose of this special issue is to highlight emerging research on the interconnected nature of interpersonal violence. The eight studies presented here utilize diverse samples and methodologies, including longitudinal and experimental designs, to examine three kinds of connections: over time (within a day to over years), across contexts (family, romantic relationships, community), and between perpetration and victimization. As a group, they trace the pathways between child maltreatment, intimate-partner violence (IPV), teen dating violence (TDV), sexual abuse and assault, and community violence, and explore their joint effects on mental and physical health.

Articles in the Special Issue

The opening paper by Hamby, Finkelhor, and Turner (2012) is the first to examine polyvictimization in the context of dating violence. Using data from the National Survey of Children Exposed to Violence, a nationally representative survey of over 4500 American youth, they document associations between reports of violence in adolescent romantic relationships and a range of other forms of victimization. The findings are dramatic: Every victim of physical TDV reported experiencing at least one other type of victimization, and about one third of the physical TDV victims fell into the most victimized 10% of the full sample. For example, 53% of the 12–17-year olds reporting dating violence also reported child maltreatment, 60% reported sexual victimization, and 97% had witnessed an assault in their family or community. Hamby et al. discuss the implications of these high rates of co-occurrence for research and practice, as well as causal processes that may give rise to them.

Jouriles, Mueller, Rosenfield, McDonald, and Dodson (2012) also investigated TDV, but focused on family processes that predict greater aggression in adolescent romantic relationships. Although they employed a high-risk sample of court-referred youths rather than a community sample and assessed perpetration rather than victimization, their findings are consistent with those of Hamby and her colleagues. They report that harsh parenting and witnessing severe IPV between caregivers each uniquely predicted higher levels of dating violence. Trauma symptoms mediated the relationship between harsh parenting and dating-violence perpetration, but not the link between witnessing IPV and dating violence perpetration. Some of these effects were stronger for girls than for boys, although gender differences were not found consistently. These results indicate that different forms of family violence and abuse have additive effects on the perpetration of

aggression toward dating partners for boys and girls, and suggest that symptoms of trauma play a role in explaining these linkages.

Fritz, Slep and O'Leary (2012) further explored the connections between individuals' exposure to violence in their family of origin and violence in their own intimate relationships. In addition, they examined how both parent and child gender might influence the nature of these connections and expanded the typical focus on individual behavior by analyzing relationship violence at the dyadic level. In a sample of over 400 married or cohabiting heterosexual couples, they reported that both individuals' and their partners' history of exposure to family violence increased the risk of physical victimization and perpetration in their relationships. There was evidence of both gender-specific and role-specific transmission of aggression across generations, but these findings were complex and resist simple explanations. Their data support the value of considering both partners' prior exposure to abuse and violence in understanding the occurrence of IPV, and raise important questions about the role of gender in explaining these associations.

Sullivan, McPartland, Armeli, Jaquier Erard, and Tennen (2012) took a closer look at IPV in a diary study designed to describe the daily co-occurrence of physical, sexual, and psychological IPV in a sample of women currently experiencing IPV. They examined patterns of associations among diverse types of IPV across and within participants over the course of 90 days, and found that some form of violence occurred on over one third of the days. The most common was psychological aggression, followed by the co-occurrence of psychological and physical IPV and the co-occurrence of psychological, physical, and sexual violence. Some differences emerged between person-level and day-level analyses. For example, whereas women who reported higher levels of physical violence also reported greater psychological and sexual violence, physical violence was much more likely to co-occur with psychological than sexual violence on the same day. This study underscores the value of a more microanalytic approach to assessing how different forms of abuse emerge and interrelate over the course of an interaction or within the same day.

Miller, Grabell, Thomas, Bermann and Graham-Bermann (2012) focused on a rarely studied family relationship at a rarely studied developmental period. They examined how a range of experiences with violence, from watching violent TV, exposure to community violence, and family violence predict aggression between preschool-aged siblings. Their findings indicate that media violence predicts sibling aggression beyond that directly experienced in the family or neighborhood, and that father-child physical aggression interacted with community violence exposure to predict aggression between siblings; specifically, community violence was associated with sibling aggression only for children experiencing high levels of aggression from their fathers. These data illustrate the importance of adopting a broad perspective that incorporates exposure to violence across a range of contexts and examines how they may interact to shape the development of aggressive behavior.

The next two articles shift the focus from family violence to sexual abuse and risk behavior. Davis, Schraufnagel, Jacques-Tiura, Norris, and George (2012) used an experimental paradigm to explore the lasting effects of sexual abuse on adult sexual aggression. Men were randomly assigned to alcohol or no-alcohol conditions and answered questions about a hypothetical sexual situation in which their female partners refused to have sexual intercourse without a condom. They found that men with a history of child sexual abuse endorsed greater beliefs in sexual entitlement and viewed a woman refusing to have unprotected sex as more sexually aroused than did men without such a history. Men who consumed alcohol also perceived the woman as more sexually aroused and had higher sexual entitlement beliefs, compared to men who did not drink. Further, the men with the greatest sexual entitlement beliefs were those who had a child sexual abuse history *and* consumed alcohol. Davis et al. hypothesized that experiencing sexual abuse as a child may result in cognitive distortions regarding sex, including beliefs that forced sex is normal and that men are entitled to sex, and that alcohol consumption can serve to magnify this effect.

Wilson, Woods, Emerson, and Donenberg (2012) investigated how exposure to physical violence in childhood related to sexual risk behavior in adolescence in a longitudinal study of a clinical sample of African American adolescents. More extensive violence exposure and cumulative exposure to different kinds of violence were associated with engaging in unsafe sex, which included more partners and inconsistent condom use; the best-fitting model included physical victimization, exposure to neighborhood violence, and violence in romantic relationships as predictors. This study indicates that the effects of violence extend to sexual risk behavior, perhaps through pervasive difficulties in physiological and self regulation, and suggests that sexually transmitted infections and pregnancies could be lowered by reducing girls' exposure to violence. The clinical implications of this study are addressed further in an invited commentary by Larance (2012). She argues for broadening the assessment of clients' experiences with abuse and violence across contexts, as well as more comprehensive approaches to intervention that are sensitive to the complexity of these experiences and the environments in which they occur.

Finally, Thompson et al. (2012) examined the impact of exposure to multiple types of violence at different developmental periods on a critical mental health outcome: suicidal ideation. This study utilized the LONGSCAN data set, which tracked over 1300 youths from ages 4 to 16. They examined both the cumulative and unique effects of a range of adverse experiences in childhood and adolescence, many of which involved abuse and violence. Greater exposure to adversity predicted greater suicidal ideation, and adversities in childhood moderated the relation between adolescent adversities and ideation, such that the effects of adolescent adversities were strongest at low levels of childhood adversities. The study also provided evidence for specific effects of particular experiences, with the best predictors of ideation including childhood physical abuse, childhood neglect, childhood family violence, childhood residential instability, adolescent physical abuse, adolescent sexual abuse, adolescent psychological maltreatment, and adolescent community violence. This study thus indicates that the timing and nature of adversities are important in understanding suicidal ideation risk in adolescence.

Taken together, these studies offer insight into the extent to which the co-occurrence of different forms of violence extends across time and over settings. They indicate that exposure to IPV and maltreatment in the family of origin have lasting effects that radiate outward into different relationships, and that victimization in one context increases the likelihood of both perpetration and victimization in other contexts. They also reveal that the effects of experiencing multiple forms of violence extend beyond symptoms of trauma and depression to diverse outcomes such as teen pregnancy and suicidal ideation.

What are the sources of these linkages? The papers in this issue propose a number of possibilities, many of which cut across types of violence and developmental periods. They include cognitive processes that arise from early experiences with violence and legitimize aggression, biological processes that undermine self-regulation, caregiver relationships that fail to protect children and are themselves sources of abuse, and neighborhoods in which it is easy for an unsupervised child to be preyed upon by violent peers or older adults. As a group, these studies have a number of critical implications for advancing the study of all forms of interpersonal violence, and for developing effective approaches to reducing violence.

Enhancing Theory and Research on Interpersonal Violence

The growing evidence of the interconnected nature of abuse, maltreatment, and violence highlights the need for a shift in the assumptions that underlie theorizing about violence. Most notably, the assumption that each type of abuse and violence is best explained by a unique set of theories and constructs needs to be replaced by the assumption that different types of violence are part of a larger pattern and share some common causes and risk factors. This shift in turn can spur the development of new conceptual models that explain how and why particular forms of violence are connected. In addition to identifying a set of common factors relevant to most

(if not all) forms of violence, it also is important to understand unique factors that explain why some people engage in particular types of violence but not others. Hamby and Grych (in press) offer a heuristic framework that describes a range of common and unique processes that may account for interconnections among different forms of violence and may serve as a step toward developing an integrated or unified theory of interpersonal violence.

However, progress in understanding co-occurrence does not need to wait for the development of new conceptual models; advances can be made by expanding studies of particular forms of violence by adding assessment of related or potentially related forms. There also are more specific issues relevant to multiple types of violence that require attention. For example, the role of gender in understanding interpersonal violence has been hotly debated for years. As the papers in this issue show, the relation between gender and violence is complex and not fully understood; variation in exactly what is measured, how it is measured, and in what sample it is measured can lead to different conclusions about gender differences in violent behavior (see Archer, 2000; Hamby, 2009). Considering the connections among different types of violence may begin to paint a clearer picture of these gender differences. For example, males who perpetrate IPV are more likely to engage in other types of aggression as well, whereas co-occurrence is less common for females (Hamby & Grych, in press). Focusing on these larger patterns may offer new insight into the developmental and contextual factors that shape male and female behavior in relationships (e.g., Caldwell, Swan, & Woodbrown, 2012).

Improving Intervention

Understanding co-occurrence also is critical for guiding more comprehensive and integrated approaches to intervention and prevention. Most prevention programs focus on a single form of violence (e.g., bullying, dating violence) and fail to account for the likely possibility that many of the individuals identified as perpetrators or victims of a particular type of violence also have been perpetrators and/or victims of other types of violence. These individuals are likely to have different needs, and consequently the effectiveness of a particular program may vary depending on participants' prior history. For example, consider a child who bullies and also witnesses violence between her or his parents at home. A bullying prevention program that does not address the violence and bullying modeled for her or him at home may not be effective for this child. Similarly, interventions that focus on one type of violence (e.g., child maltreatment) without addressing its connections to other forms (e.g., violence between caregivers) are likely to be less effective. Expanding clinical assessment to incorporate the myriad forms of abuse, trauma, and violence that an individual may have faced will provide a more accurate basis for guiding decision-making and delivering interventions that can have lasting effects (see Hamby & Grych, in press).

The emphasis on family violence as the origin of many forms of violence in adolescence and adulthood also underscores the importance of identifying at-risk children early. Alleviating some of the risks these children face could go a long way toward stopping the cycle of polyvictimization, which is often carried from one generation to the next. Prevention programs that target families of young children and school-based programs that address safe and healthy relationships in elementary school thus have the potential to reduce bullying and IPV later in life.

Developing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the many connections among diverse forms of interpersonal violence will require researchers, clinicians, and policymakers to broaden their thinking about the causes and consequences of violence, but offers the promise of significantly reducing the heavy cost that abuse, maltreatment, and trauma exact on so many children, women, and men every year. This special issue is intended to galvanize that effort by presenting new findings and innovative ideas from eight research programs that are bridging the silos of violence scholarship.

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