

OFFENDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDHOOD ABUSE & PARENTAL MOTIVES

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VIOLENCE AND CHILD ABUSE

. The United States is described as a culture of violence (Gross & Gross 1977). Child abuse is widespread, with perhaps 200,000 children dying annually from circumstances associated with abuse or neglect (Julian 1977). Would an increase in child abuse lead one to expect a later increase in violent offenders as a result of learned aggression? Physical punishment by parents is more likely to encourage than to inhibit violence. Physical punishment frustrates the child, and provides a model from which to imitate and learn. And the learning of violence comes also from mass media, peer and other reference groups, and local and national leaders (Frank 1970). That violence breeds violence is indicated by many studies. Adolescents who have killed someone tended to identify with aggressive parents, and to pattern their behavior accordingly (Curtis 1963).

. Socialization processes may encourage violence. Few groups can claim that their rearing and social control techniques concentrate on peaceful means of control. People learn that violence can be useful and that many get away with it. They learn that various gradations of violence fit to different types of people, situations, and frustrations (Goode 1969). A study of three generations of the same families of abused children supports the theme that violence breeds violence, and that a child who experiences violence has the potential of becoming a violent member of society as an adult (Silver et al 1969). Known violent offenders may have been subjected to more aggressive encounters, during childhood, than any other group of offenders. They might be expected to show differences in their parent-child relations as an outgrowth of childhood experiences.

. The most universal type of physical violence is corporal punishment by parents. Studies in

England and the United State show that between 84 and 97 percent of all parents use physical punishment during their child's early years. And the use of physical force to maintain parental authority is not confined to early childhood. Half of the parents threaten high school seniors with physical punishment. Although social scientists are still far from a full understanding of the cause of violence, it appears that children are taught violence, and that the home is a prime source for this instruction.

. A very extensive study of juvenile delinquency showed that the most marked difference between parents of delinquents and non-delinquents was that the delinquents' parents resorted to more physical punishment, and reasoned less with the juvenile. The effects of this type of training, when modeled by the child, result in later aggression (Glueck & Glueck 1950; Thompson 1957). The sons of violent criminals tend to become criminals themselves, especially if the father is cruel and negligent. But there is a lower rate of criminality in families where the father does not provide a grossly deviant model of behavior (McCord et al 1959).

. Which parents tend to abuse children? It seems to be a problem across all social classes. A physically abused child can be defined as one who receives deliberate injuries, or accidental injuries resulting from neglect by guardians. Of those who physically abuse their children, 90 percent are mentally and intellectually normal. While no one social class tends to batter more than another, the upper classes can more readily afford to take their children to private physicians who will keep quiet, while lower-class parents must take their children to public clinics. This biases the reporting on social class of physically abusing parents (Caffey et al 1972).

. Abusing parents usually show several distinctive traits, such as impulsive personality, low frustration level, immaturity, lack of affection, psychosis, alcoholism, drug addiction, and a history of abuse in their own childhood. Today's battered child becomes a battering parent tomorrow (Fontana 1971). Moreover, the battered child tends to batter younger children (Kempe & Silverman 1962).

. Physical abuse of children seems endemic in the United States since cultural norms of child rearing prescribe the use of physical force by adults toward children. Physical punishment is subtly encouraged by professional experts in child rearing, education, medicine, the press, radio, and television, and in professional journals. And the dominant religious sects in the United States condone physical punishment (Gil 1970). Corporal punishment and child abuse seem to be a complex function of various factors, such as psychopathology, cultural acceptance, certain family structural patterns, socially induced patterns of violence, learned behavior, and lack of self-control.

METHOD We will assess the background of both violent and non-violent offenders in a maximum security prison to identify trends in childhood aggression. The purpose is to identify abuse patterns which may distinguish these groups. A questionnaire is designed to measure their childhood experience as the target of parental aggression.

. To assess the difference between violent and non-violent offenders, trustee prisoners at the Oklahoma McAlester State Prison were given a 3-part questionnaire. Part 1 contained background questions, including items on family structure. Part 2 was an inventory of responses on recollections of childhood experiences. Part 3 dealt with the offender's attitude toward punishment by parents.

. The prison is a maximum security facility with about 850 inmates. About a tenth of the total

population was included in this study. Control problems arise in large convict populations, because many are dangerous. Therefore, the Warden restricted the respondent group to the trustee prisoners, and excluded the more recalcitrant inmates. A list of 300 trustees included information on race, prison number, name, and criminal offense. I selected 100 respondents equally by race, and by non-violent or violent offense.

. The guard captain called the trustees to a counseling room in groups of four. Because participation in the research was voluntary, only 82 complied, and 18 declined, after giving initial information. Each respondent was asked not to divulge any information about the research to others until all testing was completed. Of the 82 respondents, 39 were non-violent offenders, and 43 were violent offenders. Non-violent offenses were grand larceny, burglary, and forgery. Violent offenses were rape, murder, manslaughter, assault, and armed robbery.

FINDINGS On the assumption that the instrument and method were valid, there is no evidence that violence is socially learned, and no evidence that learned childhood aggression is carried over to adulthood. There were no statistical differences between the two groups. The scales evaluating home environment and neighborhood milieu afforded no significant difference between violent and non-violent offenders. This suggests that the concept of modeling and imitative learning may have no consequences for long-term patterns of violence continuing into adulthood. Of the 82 respondents, 91 percent agreed that their parents loved them; 69 percent said that they were an important part of their parental family; and 82 percent said that their parents treated them fairly, even when they were punished. Concurrently, 28 percent said that they suffered bruises from parental punishment; 29 percent said that they were spanked harder

than necessary; 29 percent claimed to have been spanked more than siblings, 25 percent did not always know the reason for the spanking; and 35 percent said that the spanking "seemed to last a long time."

. Although 91 percent of the respondents felt that their parents loved them and treated them fairly, other items suggest that violence and abuse could have existed. Then, the idea of learned childhood aggression, whether learned from parents or from the neighborhood, carried over into adult life may depend on how an individual perceives the motivation behind exhibited aggression. Respondents may not recall abuse and domestic violence if they accept parental love and concern as the basis for it. Thus, significant differences between violent and non-violent adults may exist only if, as a child, a person realized and acknowledged abuse. Society defines abuse as severe physical punishment or neglect by extrinsically defined traits. But the subjective perception of abuse, negligence, and aggression are highly variable.

. Among inmate attitudes on punishment, 79 percent said that it does not hurt children to spank them two or three times a day. Such an attitude may prevail widely in the United States. This indicates ambiguity surrounding correction, child abuse, learned aggression, and social perception.

. The victims of the non-violent crimes were strangers to the offender in 84 percent of the cases, while only 34 percent of the violent crime victims were unknown to the offender. And 21 percent were close friends, spouses, or relatives. This agrees with other findings (Schultz 1968).

CONCLUSION There are indications that perceptions and motives play a stark role in determining what may or may not be child abuse. How well is abuse defined in existing statutes? The current rate of conviction in child abuse cases is very low due to problems of

definition, circumstance, and evidence. Further research might examine more adequately the definitions of abuse, and perceptions of aggression in children, and monitor long-term effects of violence on children, as they grow toward adulthood. The ability to predict future aggression could be used against its continuation.

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