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The transmission of child abuse (1)

Summary

This paper is about patterns of intergenerational child maltreatment and the mechanisms involved in perpetuating these patterns. It is based on an international review of the literature. One of the most enduring theories in the study of family violence is that children who have been maltreated can in turn become maltreating parents. This pattern has become known as the 'Cycle of Abuse'. This paper demonstrates that there is not just one cycle, but at least four separate cycles that operate both within and outside the family. The four cycles are cultural; socio-political, psychological and biological. The central message of this paper is that if we want to reduce the overall levels of child maltreatment, we need to unwind the separate cycles and focus interventions on the different mechanisms operating in each cycle.

The Transmission of child abuse

It is now more than 30 years since Henry Kempe 'rediscovered' child abuse. Since then there has been a sustained international effort to afford effective protection to children. Yet despite these efforts, large numbers of children continue to suffer. What is worse, when children themselves become parents, they are often unable to protect their offspring or may actually inflict the sort of suffering they themselves endured. This pattern has become known as the 'Cycle of Abuse'.

The 'Cycle of Abuse'

Since the first studies by Steele & Pollock in 1968, the 'Cycle of Abuse' has been one of the most enduring, yet controversial theories in the study of family violence. Numerous researchers have tried to quantify the extent of this intergenerational transmission. Rates range from 100% in a retrospective study of severely abusing families (Oliver & Taylor, 1971); to 70% in a prospective study of high-risk parents (Egeland & Jacobvitz, 1984); to 47% in a retrospective self-report clinical study with comparison subjects (Herrenkohl et al, 1983)); to 18% for a prospective controlled study of a nationally representative sample (Straus, 1979); to 1% in a controlled agency records study for validated child abuse (Widom, 1989). The wide-ranging estimates are not as contradictory as they might appear. Definitions of abuse, type of sample - retrospective or prospective, controlled or uncontrolled, source of sample - nation-wide or high risk group, govern the rates seen.

Despite the controversies, there is now some consensus amongst researchers studying family violence in the USA and UK that around 30% of those who have been abused will go on to abuse their own children (Gelles & Loseke, 1993; Kaufman & Zigler, 1989, Oliver, 1993). This figure constitutes a significant risk factor, being approximately six times the base rate for abuse found in the general population (5%) (Kaufman & Zigler, 1989).

Kaufman & Zigler (1989) suggest that the time has come for researchers to cease arguing over the precise percentages. Instead we need to focus our efforts on the conditions under which the transmission of abuse is likely to occur. This paper is part of this process.

Cultural factors in intergenerational child maltreatment

Cross-cultural studies demonstrate that parents the world over are faced with a similar task when rearing children. In all societies, the helpless infant must be protected from the risks that threaten survival and turned into a responsible adult obeying the rules of their community. Whiting and Edwards (1988), however, have shown that although children share panhuman characteristics that equip them for survival, cultural forces modulate social development and lead to increasing differences in the kinds of behavior that adults expect. The needs and environment of different societies play an important role in developing different parenting styles. These styles are largely passed from generation to generation.

Although no society condones child maltreatment, what is, and is not defined as abusive is culturally constructed (Finkelhor & Korbin, 1988). Children around the world are at risk from a wide range of violence that is generally carried out by their parents or with their parents' tacit approval (Levinson, 1989). Most types of culturally condoned violence only occur in a few societies. The major exception is the use of physical punishment in child rearing. The problem is that there is a relationship between severe chastisement and serious injury to children. Finkelhor & Korbin (1988) have also shown that cross-culturally particular categories of chil-

dren are vulnerable to maltreatment. These children may be those of inferior health status, malnourished children, handicapped children, excess or unwanted children and stigmatised children such as the illegitimate.

Korbin (1987) suggests that interventions in the cultural cycle of child maltreatment need to be aware of both the EMIC (insider) perspective and the ETIC (outsider) perspective. Central to the EMIC perspective is working alongside local communities. Communities around the world have to come to their own decisions in defining what parental behavior is abusive; have to decide on priorities and targets for intervention, and have to develop effective strategies for limiting child maltreatment.

Alongside the EMIC perspective is the role of international associations such as ISCPAN and UNICEF in establishing definitions of specific types of child maltreatment that are internationally unacceptable; in raising awareness about child maltreatment; in disseminating knowledge, and in setting targets to combat child abuse. Progress on achieving targets will require an international database of key indicators.

The Socio-political cycle of child maltreatment

Most families even in extreme conditions do not maltreat their young, but small changes in social conditions have important effects in lowering the thresholds where many parents can parent effectively. Although child abuse cuts across social and economic groups, it does so unevenly. The poor are always most at risk (Gil, 1970, Gelles, 1973, Straus et al., 1988).

State policies have an important role in increasing or decreasing the threshold where parents can parent effectively. Directly or indirectly, for example, state policies can lead to a lack of human security. Human security (UNDP, 1994) refers to cataclysmic events such as war and national disasters, as well as to job, income, health access to education, environmental security, security from crime and violence and social integration.

In countries undergoing rapid socio-economic change, traditional family support systems can be disrupted. State policies have an important role in managing socio-economic change in such a way that it maintains effective family functioning. The lack of human security, for example in countries split apart by war such as in Bosnia, has intergenerational continuities. There is a growing realisation that even after the original threat has diminished there can be emotional costs that affect parenting abilities of future generations.

Policies to promote the welfare of women are particularly important. Children's well-being and women's well-being are inextricably linked. Women cannot effectively rear healthy babies if they themselves are ill, malnourished, overworked, insecure within their families and treated by society as a disadvantaged group. These patterns are particularly strong in developing countries, although in advanced economies a similar pattern can be seen amongst inner-city dwellers.

With the increasing diversity of family life, the rise in divorce and lone parent families, social policies also have an important role in ensuring that children are not disadvantaged by the type of family in which they are brought up. Family disruption in childhood is particularly damaging for children's life prospects when this is linked to other problems such as poverty and parenting problems (Buchanan & Ten Brinke, 1997). There is some evidence that reliable day care in the early years can mitigate these disadvantages.

The advances in family planning bring the hope that every child born will be a wanted child. In Western democracies, dramatic falls in the birth rate have been seen. In other parts of the world overpopulation remains a concern. Pronatalist or family limitation policies need to tread with caution. Professor Radulian of the Romanian National Committee of UNICEF in speaking of the forced birth rate legislated by the previous totalitarian regime in his country noted that the policies lead to an increasing number of abandoned, handicapped, orphaned and vagrant children. Dytrych (1992) in the Czech Republic has shown that where women were denied abortion, 'unwanted' children had considerably more difficulties and there were intergenerational continuities. On the other hand, state enforced family limitation such as the one-child policy in China, may also have long term implications.

Social policies also have a role in ensuring that there are effective policies to protect children. Specific groups of children live in what the United nations describe as particularly 'difficult circumstances'. Amongst these are street children, child prostitutes, child refugees and children with AIDS. Child prostitution exists because it answers a demand. Sex tours are advertised in Western travel guides. Child refugees are the result of conflicts, but 90% of all arms exported are provided by industrialised countries. These difficult problems suggest both an international responsibility and the need for global strategies.

Psychological research supporting the 'Cycle of abuse'

Theories to support the cycle of abuse have come from different psychological traditions. The early studies were largely based on the psychodynamic tradition and related child abuse to the damaged 'ego' of parents who had themselves been abused as children. Social learning theorists rejected this idea. They argued that aggression was both learned and that it took place within a social context. Developments from social learning theory include the cognitive behavior approaches. Among these are Newberger & White's (1989) work on parental cognitions. Parents with troubled relationships with their children were frequently unable to perceive their children as having needs of their own. Attachment theorists such as Crittenden & Ainsworth (1989) has shown that maternal style of child-rearing begins to influence the child at a very young age. Zeanah & Anders (1987) add that these early working models compel an individual to re-create the relationship experiences in their own lives. Violence was not passed on *per se* but the ongoing theme of the caregiving relationship.

Work from Straus (1979), Garbarino (1977), Bronfenbrenner (1977) and Belsky (1980) have demonstrated the limitation of single linear models. Intergenerational child maltreatment can be understood better if it is seen as a product of the interaction of risk and protective factors operating at individual, family, community and societal levels. Life history research by Rutter 1989) and others has expanded on these ideas and demonstrated through longitudinal studies that there is a range of risk and protective factors that interact throughout the life course.

This offers the hope that individual families at risk may be identified and supported before the child is harmed. Browne & Saqi (1988) have demonstrated that identifying those at risk is still an inexact science. However, studies such as Olds & Henderson (1989) have demonstrated that where young mothers are identified as at risk, and supported through the early years, such interventions can reduce rates of child maltreatment.

In the long term, further work is needed on identifying protective factors and/or strengths in vulnerable families, and developing carefully controlled trials on programs to promote their strengths. The forthcoming SureStart program in the UK, which will offer programs for parents and pre-school children in areas of high need may lead to better outcomes for some of these children.

Biological factors in intergenerational child maltreatment

The biological cycle of child maltreatment relates to two realities. Some parents are biologically more vulnerable to the risk of abusing their children and some children are biologically more vulnerable to being abused (Rutter, 1989). First biological factors may relate to intergenerational patterns of disease and poor health care. The infant death rate is a good indicator not only to children who die, but also the numbers of children who may be born damaged and as a result more difficult to rear. Similarly, maternal death rates will predict not only mothers who die but mothers who may find rearing their children more difficult because they are in poor health. Programs that improve the health of parents and children and limit disease will have the secondary effect of improving parenting.

Inherited disorders and characteristics may also affect parenting. For many practitioners heredity was simply something that you could not do anything about. Rutter et al. (1990) suggests that these views are no longer tenable. As knowledge increases, genetic disorder may increasingly be treatable by environmental manipulation. There is also growing evidence of synergistic interactions between biological predisposition and subsequent environmental stress. A person born with a biological vulnerability to schizophrenia, for example, may avoid developing the disease by living in a less stressful environment (Tiernari et al., 1990).

The current interest in behavioral genetics has given rise to the idea that genetics will unlock the secrets of behavior. The situation is infinitely more complex. Genes, however, play a part in the inheritance of broad temperamental traits (Loehlin, 1992). These traits may make par-

enting more or less difficult (Caspi et al., 1990). Some character traits, such as high reactivity in the parent, or difficult temperamental character traits in the child, may be associated with abuse. However, these traits may be offset in positive environmental conditions.

The challenge in breaking the biological cycle of risk, is first by improving health care and second by identifying those at risk. Early identification of biologically high risk children and parents may facilitate targeting protective or 'buffer' programs at those who need them.

Conclusions

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that by breaking down the large problem into its constituent parts, we are better able to understand the processes and better able to focus our interventions. This review indicates that in the four cycles of child maltreatment, there are opportunities for intervention at different levels. International organisations such as ISPCAN and UNICEF have an important role in creating a climate where child maltreatment should be recognised for the crime against humanity that it is. To do this, there is a need to expand our knowledge, disseminate what is known and provide statistical indicators to monitor our progress. National policies also have a role in developing policies that are more or less child-and-family-friendly. Child-and-family-friendly societies are likely to see reducing rates of intergenerational child abuse. Communities can also bring together their expertise on the needs and priorities of their areas. Such communities may need the support of outside organisations who are prepared to work in 'partnership' with them. Professionals working with individual families who have a history of abuse need to develop carefully controlled studies on programs that 'work' to break the cycle of child maltreatment. If we bring together our knowledge, energy, expertise and understanding, there is a good chance that many children who are abused today will not go on to abuse their children.

Note

1. The full findings were published in a book by the author in 1996 called *'Cycles of Child Maltreatment 'facts, fallacies and interventions'* John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, UK. This paper is based on a presentation at the VI ISPCAN European Conference on Child Abuse and neglect in Barcelona on October 12-11, 1997.

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