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Empathy and narcissism in a sample of child abuse perpetrators and a comparison sample of foster parents

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this research was to study the personality variables of empathy and narcissism in a sample of child abuse perpetrators and a comparison sample of foster parents, conceptualized as nonabusive parents, in order to gain further understanding of perpetrators and to provide clues for intervention.

Method: The sample consisted of two groups: physically and emotionally abusive parents ($n = 52$) and foster parents ($n = 101$). Participants responded to three instruments: the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), an instrument measuring individual differences in empathy, and two instruments measuring narcissism: the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) and the Hypersensitivity Narcissism Scale (HSNS).

Results: Statistically significant differences were found between the two groups on three of the four subscales of the IRI: perspective-taking, empathic concern, and personal distress. Based on the definition of these subscales, the abusive parents as compared to the foster parents were not able to take the perspective of another or see things from another's viewpoint, showed less warmth, compassion and concern for others, and experienced difficulty in tense interpersonal situations. Statistically significant differences were found for the two groups on three of the six subscales of the NPI: authority, exhibitionism, and superiority, and on the HSNS. The abusive parents demonstrated less self-confidence, a greater lack of impulse control and were more narcissistic than their foster parent counterparts.

Conclusions: The results suggest that it is how the perpetrators experience aversive behavior in their children that may provoke them to physically and emotionally abuse their children. Their self-centeredness in addition to their deficiencies in empathy may cause them to experience their children's misbehavior as an affront to their authority. Implications for treatment are made from this conceptualization of parental abuse.

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Empathy and narcissism in child abuse perpetrators

Several paradigms have been suggested for understanding child abuse. Although child abuse initially was viewed from a unidimensional perspective, more recently multicausal or multidimensional models have been proposed and tested taking into account the diversity of factors related to this societal problem. One such model with empirical support suggests that child abuse must be viewed from the perspective of: (1) factors associated with individual parents; (2) factors related to the family as a social system; and (3) social/cultural factors impacting on the family unit (Wiehe, 1996). Wolfe (1999) proposed a model comprised of research on psychiatric characteristics of the perpetrator, psychological characteristics of the perpetrator, and ecological factors. An earlier paradigm of parent-child abuse (Belsky, 1980), based on Bronfenbrenner's concept of the division of ecological space (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), suggests that child abuse be studied at four levels: (1) ontogenic development; (2) the microsystem; (3) the exosystem; and (4) the macrosystem. Ontogenic development is defined as the traits and characteristics of the individual parents and their contribution to the parenting process. The microsystem represents the family setting or the immediate context in which the abuse occurs. Formal and informal social structures; for example, the neighborhood, workplace, and social support systems, form the exosystem. The macrosystem is comprised of the cultural values and belief systems that impact on the parents in their parenting role (Belsky, 1980).

Each of these paradigms reflects the complexity of understanding child abuse. The diversity of these paradigms also calls for multiple approaches to treatment. While the family as a social system, as well as social and cultural factors impacting on the family should be studied in our attempt to understand child abuse, research also should focus on personality characteristics of individual parents or parent surrogates that impact on the abuse of a child. This research studied the personality variables of empathy and narcissism in a sample of abusive and foster parents, the latter conceptualized as nonabusive parents. This research may aid in our understanding of physical and emotional child abuse perpetrators and give us clues for treatment or intervention. (Sexual abuse is not included in the definition of child abuse in this research because additional dynamics are involved in this type of abuse.)

Empathy and child abuse

Research in social psychology identifies a relationship between empathy and aggression. This research has documented that empathy serves as a mechanism for terminating aggressive behavior before injury is inflicted on the object of the aggression (Feshbach, 1964; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). A reduction in aggressive behaviors, an increase in prosocial behaviors, and an enhancement of self-esteem resulted when a program training elementary school children to be empathic was implemented (Feshbach, Feshbach, Favre, & Ballard-Campbell, 1983). This research suggests that empathy training for child abuse perpetrators may be an approach to stopping abuse from occurring.

Research also indicates that empathy is a significant variable in effective parenting. Studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between empathy and a variety of behaviors that parenting requires. These behaviors include being understanding, being able to give comfort,

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