



## The relation between abuse and violent delinquency: The conversion of shame to blame in juvenile offenders

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** While the relationship between abusive parenting and violent delinquency has been well established, the cognitive and emotional processes by which this occurs remain relatively unidentified. The objective of this work is to apply a conceptual model linking abusive parenting to the conversion of shame into blaming others and therefore to violent delinquency.

**Methods:** A retrospective study of 112 adolescents (90 male; 22 female; ages 12–19 years;  $M = 15.6$ ;  $SD = 1.4$ ) who were incarcerated in a juvenile detention facility pending criminal charges, completed measures of exposure to abusive and nonabusive discipline, expressed and converted shame, and violent delinquency.

**Results:** Findings tend to confirm the conceptual model. Subjects who converted shame (i.e., low expressed shame, high blaming others) tended to have more exposure to abusive parenting and showed more violent delinquent behavior than their peers who showed expressed shame. Subjects who showed expressed shame (i.e., high expressed shame, low blaming others) showed less violent delinquency than those who showed converted shame.

**Conclusions:** Abusive parenting impacts delinquency directly and indirectly through the effects of shame that is converted. Abusive parenting leads to the conversion of shame to blaming others, which in turn leads to violent delinquent behavior.

**Practice implications:** For juvenile offenders, the conversion of shame into blaming others appears to contribute to pathological outcomes in relation to trauma. Translation of this work into clinical practice is recommended.

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### Introduction

Violent delinquency has had devastating effects on all sectors of US society, leaving victims, perpetrators, their families, and communities coping with its aftermath. An estimated 92,300 juveniles are arrested annually for violent crimes such as aggravated assaults, robbery, and forcible rape (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Given the evidence linking abusive parenting and violent, aggressive behavior (Lansford et al., 2002; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998; National Counsel on Crime and Delinquency, 1999), the current study examines a conceptual model proposed by Lewis (1992) in which the relationship between abusive parenting and violent delinquency is mediated by emotional and attributional factors.

Shame is a state in which negative, global, and stable attributions of the self are made as a result of a perceived failure to meet standards and has been linked to adjustment following exposure to trauma. Phenomenologically, shame is a painful emotional experience and is associated with an overpowering desire to hide or disappear. According to the general conceptual

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model proposed by Lewis, if a victim's attributions about why the traumatic events occurred are internal, stable, and global (e.g., "This happened to me because I am a bad person") they are most likely to induce intensely negative feelings of shame and increase the likelihood of poor adjustment (Lewis, 1992).

How this poor adjustment is manifest—as depressive or aggressive symptoms—depends on a person's response to shame. In the present study, we consider two responses to shame, expression and conversion. Expressed shame is associated with negative attributions that are internal, stable, and global and are accompanied by the phenomenology commonly associated with shame. The literature on self-conscious emotions reports associations between expressed shame and internalizing problems, such as withdrawal, depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and feelings of worthlessness (Ferguson & Stegge, 1995; Harder & Lewis, 1986; Hoblitzelle, 1987; Lewis, 1971, 1992; Tangney, 1991).

Alternatively, feelings of shame may be repressed and converted into other forms, such as "other-blaming" attributions, anger or other emotions (Scheff, 2001; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 2001). In the present study, converted shame refers to the conversion of shame to blame, a process by which hostility is directed away from the self on to others. For example, a shamed person, unwilling to acknowledge these feelings, might blame others for their own shame-inducing behavior thus insulating themselves from their own intensely negative feelings. Consistent with descriptions of unacknowledged or bypassed shame (Lewis, 1971, 1992), the conversion shame to blame reduces one's own part in the shame experience and allows one to take action in an effort to protect the self. Converted shame has been associated with a host of externalizing problems, such as hostility, anger, and abusiveness (Dutton, van Ginkel, & Starzomski, 1995; Ferguson, Eyre, & Ashbaker, 2000; Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Lewis's (1992) conceptual model has been explored in various abused populations.

Research with victims of sexual abuse has found that expressed shame and attributions of self-blame mediated the relationship between incidence and severity of abuse, and subsequent forms of psychopathology, such as depression and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (Coffey, Leitenberg, Henning, Turner, & Bennet, 1996; Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 1998, 2002). One area with particularly strong findings has been relative to sexual abuse. Feiring, Taska, and Lewis (1998) found that sexually abused children's expressed shame mediated the relation between the degree of abuse and the development of depressive and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms. Immediately after disclosure of sexual abuse, the severity of abuse had a direct effect on behavior problems, but the degree of abuse also had an indirect effect. However, 1 year later, shame and blame-related attributions continued to predict behavior problems, while abuse severity no longer had a direct effect nor was related to attributions and shame. Finally, decreases in expressed shame over time predicted long-term recovery (Feiring et al., 2002). This study suggests that both shame and blame-related attributions are important mediators in explaining the variability in psychopathology following abuse.

Findings from research on emotions and problem behavior in maltreated children suggest a similar process. For example, work by Bennett, Sullivan, and Lewis (2005) found that expressed shame mediated the relationship between maltreatment and anger, and anger, in turn, mediated the relationship between shame and behavior problems. More specifically, the abusive parenting associated with maltreatment delivers a consistent message that children are "bad." These global, negative self-beliefs are the primary elicitors of shame. Highly shamed individuals are likely to convert their shame to blaming others and thus to show anger toward the individuals they believe to be judging them (Bennett, Sullivan, & Lewis, 2005).

The relation between abusive parenting and violent delinquency has been well established (Dodge, Pettit, Bates, & Valente, 1995; Kelley, Thornberry, & Smith, 1997; Patterson, 1995; Widom, 1992). Physical abuse in childhood is consistently identified with increased risk of violent criminal behavior in adolescence and adulthood (Cicchetti & Manly, 2001; Lansford et al., 2002; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998). Compared to non-abused adolescents, juveniles exposed to physically abusive and psychologically aggressive parenting have been found to have high rates of self-reported delinquency, involvement in serious and violent delinquent behavior (Kelley et al., 1997), arrests for criminal acts (Widom, 1992), and recidivism (National Counsel on Crime and Delinquency, 1999). Research has confirmed the relation between abusive parenting and violent delinquency in community samples (Lansford et al., 2002), samples of maltreated children (Mayfield & Widom, 1996), and in criminal offenders (McCord, 1991). Abused children are 9 times more likely to become involved in criminal activities and to continue their delinquent behavior (Crowley, Mikulich, Ehlers, Hall, & Whitmore, 2003; Wiebush, Freitag, & Baird, 2001). These studies highlight the link between abusive parenting and violent delinquent behavior.

Other studies provide support for the connection between the tendency to blame others, and aggressive and violent behavior. Blaming others for one's own harmful behavior has been linked with delinquent behavior (Cramer & Kelly, 2004; Dodge, McClaskey, & Feldman, 1985; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Blaming others often provides justification for aggressive responses (Averill, 1982). Lochman (1987) found that when compared with their non-aggressive peers, delinquent boys were more likely to blame others for being aggressive during conflict situations. Research has confirmed the association between violent delinquent behavior and the tendency to blame others in conflict situations (Cramer & Kelly, 2004; Zelli, Dodge, Lochman, Laird, & CPPRG, 1999). Several authors report that shame-prone individuals tend to exhibit high levels of hostility and abusiveness (Dutton, 2002; Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996) and others have identified repeated patterns of shame and rage as "the motor" that drives violent behavior (Retzinger, 1991; Scheff, 2001). While these studies have focused on attribution of blame, they appear to support our view that abusive parenting leads to converted shame, and in turn to aggression.

Two types of shame reactions are possible, expressed shame and converted shame. We believe that converted shame is measured by avoiding blame and by blaming others, while expressed shame is measured by the amount of shame expressed on shame scales. The model we propose to test is seen in Fig. 1.

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