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The relationships of dissociation and affective family environment with the intergenerational cycle of child abuse[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose was to test a model that may explain how physically abused children become physically abusive parents. It was predicted that when the family's affective environment is uncohesive, unexpressive, and conflictual, a history of abuse experiences would be associated with elevated dissociation. It was hypothesized that dissociation would mediate between a childhood history of abuse and the current potential to be physically abusive.

Method: Abuse history, affective environment in the family-of-origin, dissociation, and abuse potential were assessed in a sample of 76 mothers with elementary school-age children.

Results: Predictions were supported. Affective Family Environment moderated the relation between abuse history and dissociation, with abuse history relating to greater dissociation primarily when the family environment was conflictual, uncohesive and unexpressive. Further, dissociation significantly mediated the relation between abuse history and abuse potential ($Z=2.19, p<.05$).

Conclusions: Dissociation's strong association with abuse potential may partially explain why only some abused children later perpetuate the cycle of abuse, as those who are not dissociative into adulthood are likely to have lower abuse potential, in contrast to those displaying elevated dissociation. The extent of the dissociation may depend on the affective family environment in which the abuse took place.

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Keywords: Child abuse; Dissociation; Abuse potential; Family environment

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Introduction

There is a great need to specify the factors and developmental pathways that result in physically abusive behavior. A conservative estimate specifies that 171,570 American children were subjected to physical abuse in 1 year (i.e., 2001), an estimate including only those cases that were substantiated by Child Protective Services (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). Physical abuse is associated with a wide range of psychological problems. These associated difficulties include (but are not limited to) deficiencies in behavioral regulation (e.g., anger management skills), problems in social development (e.g., disordered attachment, lacking empathy), and cognitive/emotional problems (e.g., inability to recognize and appropriately express emotions, inability to trust, slow language development), in addition to elevated risk for a variety of psychological disorders (Azar, Ferraro, & Breton, 1998; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1995). The specification of pathways terminating in physically abusive behavior would be extremely useful, because such models would suggest a variety of ways to intervene to prevent child abuse. Such models would further suggest appropriate intervention strategies at different developmental stages. The primary goal of the current study was to propose and test a model specifying one pathway to abusiveness.

There is one pathway to abusive behavior that is commonly referred to in the literature. Researchers of the intergenerational model of abuse transmission (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987; Oliver, 1993) have estimated that $30 \pm 5\%$ of parents abused as children abuse their own children, in contrast to the population base rate of 4% (Dinwiddie & Bucholz, 1993). However, these estimates suggest that approximately two thirds of abused children do not become abusive parents. In addition, a review paper (Ertem, Leventhal, & Dobbs, 2000) questioned the validity of the intergenerational transmission theory. The review paper determined that of two studies examining the theory that the review authors found to be methodologically sound, results in one study supported the existence of intergenerational transmission, and the other study's results refuted the existence of such transmission. In summary, a simplistic model of intergenerational transmission is no longer useful, and additional intervening mechanisms are necessary to explain why some continue the abuse cycle and others do not. Narang and Contreras (2000) built upon the simplistic intergenerational model, by providing initial empirical support for the hypothesis that dissociation may mediate between a history of being physically abused as a child and developing abusive tendencies as an adult.

Dissociation and its relevance to the cycle of abuse

Dissociation has been defined as “a process that produces a discernible alteration in a person’s thoughts, feelings, or actions so that for a period of time certain information is not associated or integrated with other information as it normally or logically would be” (West, 1967, p. 890). Dissociation entails not merely unavailable or minimally available memories, as in repression. Rather, dissociation entails that memory, behavior, emotion, and identity are only loosely integrated. Thus, a dissociative person may experience anger, remember the events that caused that anger, and yet fail to understand that the remembered event is causing the anger (and might also speak of that event without feeling concurrent anger). Dissociation is defined by reduced integration of emotion, behavior, identity, and memory.

The association between a childhood history of physical and/or sexual abuse and dissociation in adulthood is ubiquitous across clinical, psychiatric inpatient, and undergraduate samples (Becker-Lausen, Sanders, & Chinsky, 1995; Chu & Dill, 1990; DiTomasso & Routh, 1993; Narang & Contreras, 2000).

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