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DISSOCIATION AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN CHILD ABUSE HISTORY AND ADULT ABUSE POTENTIAL

DAVID SINGH NARANG AND JOSEFINA M. CONTRERAS

Department of Psychology, Kent State University, Kent, OH, USA

ABSTRACT

Objective: It has commonly been found that abused children are at risk for later becoming abusive parents (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987; Oliver, 1993) and observational learning has been discussed as a mechanism that perpetuates this intergenerational cycle of abuse. However, two thirds of abused children do not become abusive (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987). Thus, the goal of the current study was to examine whether dissociation functions as an additional mechanism mediating the relation between a history of child abuse and abusiveness as an adult.

Method: A cross-sectional design was used to examine physical abuse history, dissociation, and physical abuse potential in a sample of 190 college students. Questionnaires were utilized to assess the three constructs.

Results: Findings indicated that the three constructs were intercorrelated. In particular, a newly established association was found between dissociation and physical abuse potential ($r = .54, p < .0001$). The primary finding was that the relation between physical abuse history and physical abuse potential was significantly mediated ($z = 2.19, p < .05$) by level of dissociation, with dissociation accounting for approximately half of the observed relation between history of abuse and abuse potential.

Conclusion: Results suggested that dissociation may be one mechanism that helps to perpetuate the intergenerational cycle of abuse. Although dissociation promotes psychological survival during children's abuse experiences, it may result in the development of abusive tendencies in later life. Reducing parental dissociation may assist clinicians in preventing or terminating physical child abuse. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd.

Key Words—Child abuse, Physical abuse, Dissociation, Abuse potential, Perpetrator.

INTRODUCTION

THERE HAS BEEN much theorizing and some empirical study devoted to examining the relation between being abused as a child and abusing one's own children. 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, the population base rate of initiating physically abusive behavior toward children has been estimated at 4% (Dinwiddie & Bucholz, 1993). Many researchers have noted that observational learning may be influential in perpetuating the intergenerational cycle (e.g., Ammerman, 1990; Herzberger, 1983; Szykula & Fleischman, 1985). Children model behavior that is followed by positive consequences, and because physical abuse is effective in gaining temporary compliance with the abuser's wishes, it is likely that most physically abused children have observed abusive behavior being reinforced. In fact, there is empirical support for this model and some of its predictions. For example, researchers

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Requests for reprints should be sent to either author at Department of Psychology, Kent State University, P.O. Box 5190, Kent, OH 44242.

(Milner, Robertson, & Rogers, 1990) have found that physical abuse history is more strongly related than sexual abuse history to adults' potential to be physically abusive (Child Abuse Potential Inventory [CAP]; Milner, 1986).

Given that approximately two thirds of abused children do not become abusive parents, however, additional mechanisms are necessary to explain why some continue the abuse cycle and others do not. The goal of the present study was to examine dissociation as a possible intervening variable explaining the relation between a history of physical child abuse and physically abusive tendencies in adulthood.

Dissociation's Utility in an Intergenerational Model of Abuse Transmission

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). Anecdotal reports suggest that parents with abuse histories who continue the intergenerational cycle of child abuse rely more heavily upon dissociation in adulthood than do parents who break the cycle (Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988; Hunter & Kihlstrom, 1979; Kaufman & Zigler, 1987; Oliver, 1993). The cited researchers have discussed their observations that abusiveness among parents with histories of child abuse is often accompanied by parental memories of their own childhood abuse that lack detail and corresponding affect. These vaguely defined dissociative symptoms noted by interviewers, but not operationalized or measured, have been used to describe abuse cycle maintainers and to contrast them with cycle breakers (Egeland et al., 1988; Hunter & Kihlstrom, 1979; Kaufman & Zigler, 1987; Oliver, 1993).

Theoretical writings have discussed observations that child abuse results in elevated dissociation among the victims (Braun & Sachs, 1985; Putnam, 1985). Further, there is substantial empirical support for an association between a childhood history of abuse and dissociation in adulthood across clinical, psychiatric inpatient, and undergraduate samples (Becker-Lausen, Sanders, & Chinsky, 1995; Chu & Dill, 1990; DiTomasso & Routh, 1993). These elevations in dissociation among abused populations are understandable given that reliance upon this coping mechanism appears to serve adaptive functions for these children. Dissociation allows the abused child to compartmentalize traumatic experiences so that he/she may function in other spheres (Ludwig, 1983; Putnam, 1991). It may also serve to increase tolerance to physical pain (Giolas & Sanders, 1992).

However, an elevated dependence upon dissociation that continues into adulthood may have negative implications for adjustment. Adults with the worst general mental health have been found to be the most reliant upon dissociation as their primary defense, and personality disordered adults have been found to be four times more likely than normals to depend heavily upon dissociation (Vaillant, 1994). In addition to direct links with poor adjustment in adulthood, dissociation has also been found to significantly mediate the relation between a history of childhood abuse and adult outcomes of increased victimization and additional stressful life events (Becker-Lausen et al., 1995). Thus, this coping mechanism that promotes survival during childhood victimizations appears to result in poor adaptive functioning during adulthood.

Only one study has empirically investigated the association between dissociation and abusiveness (Egeland & Susman-Stillman, 1996). Among impoverished mothers with abuse histories, the dissociation score (Dissociative Experiences Scale [DES]; Bernstein & Putnam, 1986) of those who continued the abuse cycle ($n = 14$; $M = 36.1$) was more than double that of those who broke the abuse cycle ($n = 10$; $M = 15.8$), a difference that reached significance despite the small sample size. The study indicates a clear association between dissociation and abusiveness among mothers with childhood abuse histories. However, the study was not designed to empirically test whether dissociation actually mediated the relation between a history of childhood abuse and abusiveness

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