



Research article

Exposure to violence, typology, and recidivism in a probation sample of domestic violence perpetrators



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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the predictive utility of self-reported domestic violence perpetrators' exposure to violence in their family of origin and patterns related to this exposure through the use of longitudinal analyses on a sample of 228 men on probation in Lake County, Illinois. Differences in typology, recidivism, recidivism frequency, and violent behavior survival patterns in men with a history of domestic violence perpetration and with varying levels of family of origin violence exposure were examined. Findings suggest that those who witnessed interparental violence (either alone, or in combination with experiencing violence) were most likely to be classified as Generally Violent offenders (e.g., perpetrators who direct violence toward their family and others), compared to those who did not report experiencing or witnessing violence. In addition, results also indicate that men who experienced both witnessing interparental violence and receiving physical abuse in childhood were more likely to recidivate more frequently compared to those who did not report experiencing or witnessing violence. No significant findings for typology and recidivism were noted. Clinical and policy/practice implications are discussed.

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A variety of short and long-term psychological, emotional, cognitive, and social effects have been correlated with children who report exposure to violence in their family of origin (Owen et al., 2008; Straus, 1992; Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980; Widom, 1989). Adults who report being abused as children face increased risks for: depression (Felitti et al., 1998; Widom, 2000), alcoholism and drug use (Felitti et al., 1998; Widom, 2000), and criminality (Widom, 2000). Furthermore, researchers have estimated that roughly 20–30% of American children have witnessed violence between their parents (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009; Straus, 1992). Rosenbaum and O'Leary (1981) noted that male children who witnessed parental violence tended to exhibit more conduct disorder and general signs of distress as opposed to those who did not witness parental violence. Witnessing interparental abuse as a child or adolescent has been linked to numerous detrimental outcomes in adults, including: depression, trauma, general violence and partner violence, antisocial behaviors, and substance use (Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Henning, Leitenberg, Coffey, Bennett, & Jankowski, 1997; Widom, 1989). Research focusing on outcomes for individuals who have been exposed to both types of violence (e.g., witnessing and experiencing) has been limited, and has yielded mixed results in terms of whether this dual exposure results in significant additive effects compared to witnessing only (MacDonell, 2012). However, despite several studies focusing on the relationship between exposure to violence in one's family of origin and later perpetration, these mixed results have appeared to produce more confusion rather

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than clarity on the matter. The aim of this paper is to provide more clarity to this debate using a longitudinal probation sample, a population which has yet to be examined for these particular factors.

1. Intergenerational transmission of violence

For decades, the intergenerational transmission of violence hypothesis has been one of the most studied theoretical conceptualizations to help explain why aggression and violence occurs between intimate partners (for an overview of theories, see [Busby, Holman & Walker, 2008](#)). This theory postulates that children learn how to behave and treat others through observation of the violent behaviors that are used by their parents, which enacts a cycle of abuse ([Dutton, van Ginkel, & Starzomski, 1995](#); [Jankowski, Leitenberg, Henning, & Coffey, 1999](#); [Stith et al., 2000](#)). Furthermore, it is rooted in social learning theory, which hypothesizes that observational learning is the key process in enabling this transference of violence, and this direct behavioral conditioning (vicarious reinforcement) and imitation of other's behavior is how this cycle is perpetuated ([Bandura, 1973, 1977](#); [Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994](#)).

Social learning suggests that children not only learn how to commit violence, but also positively evaluate violence when it is rewarded (i.e., the perpetrator gets what they want; [Dutton & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1997](#); [Kalmuss, 1984](#)). The parents model this violent behavior for the child who then later imitates this behavior and applies it to their own relationships in late adolescence and adulthood ([Egeland, 1993](#)). [Stith, Rosen, and Middleton \(2000\)](#) believe that failure to learn how to deal with conflict appropriately, combined with modeling, imitation, and positive reinforcement for violent behavior are the mechanisms of this transmission. In addition, generalization has been conceptualized to be an important mechanism, especially in cases where the child experiences physical abuse and/or harsh corporal punishment ([Caesar, 1988](#)). [Ehrensaft et al. \(2003\)](#) suggest that excessive punishment or abuse may serve as a model for conflict resolution, which may be generalized to later romantic partner relationships.

2. Effects and outcomes associated with later violent perpetration

The relationship between childhood victimization and perpetration of domestic violence in adulthood has been well supported ([MacDonell, 2012](#); [White & Widom, 2003](#)), as abused children have been shown to display more violence toward their children and domestic partners in comparison to non-abused individuals ([Straus, 1992](#); [Straus et al., 1980](#); [Widom, 1989](#)). [Delsol, Margolin, and John \(2003\)](#) and [Delsol and Margolin \(2004\)](#) found a modest association existed between experiencing violence in one's family of origin and engaging in intimate partner violence, and this relationship becomes more pronounced in clinical populations than in community samples. Furthermore, a meta-analysis by [MacDonell \(2012\)](#) suggests that although witnessing interparental violence was significantly related to internalizing problems in adulthood (e.g., depression, trauma, etc.), and experiencing child abuse was more likely to contribute to later perpetration of family violence. However, others studies suggest that witnessing interparental violence as children has a bigger impact on future perpetration of intimate partner violence ([DeMaris, 1990](#); [Hastings & Hamberger, 1988](#); [Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986](#); [Kalmuss, 1984](#); [Murrell, Christoff, & Henning, 2007](#)).

Other studies suggest that while both types of violence are related to future domestic violence perpetration, neither type of violence is a better predictor than the other ([Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981](#); [Whitfield, Anda, Dube, & Felitti, 2003](#)). There is evidence that a potential "double whammy" effect exists, and that individuals who experience both types of violence are at an exponential risk for future perpetration compared to those who experience only one type of violence or no violence at all in their family of origin ([Caesar, 1988](#); [Franklin, Menaker, & Kercher, 2012](#); [Holtzworth-Munroe, Bates, Smutzler, & Sandin, 1997](#); [Kalmuss, 1984](#); [Widom, 1989](#)). [Kalmuss \(1984\)](#) suggests that witnessing interparental violence is a stronger predictor of future intimate partner violence than being abused; however, she also suggests that the probability of marital violence increases when an individual is exposed to both types of family of origin violence. Finally, it is important to note that not every child demonstrates these long-term effects of exposure to violence, and more research is needed to look at specific differences between experiencing abuse and/or witnessing abuse as a possible explanation of violence transmission. While modeling seems like a promising explanation, the specific mechanism(s) through which this intergenerational transmission of violence occurs remains unclear. It is clear, however, that exposure to violence has deleterious effects on individuals, and the attributes of the relationship remain complex in nature ([Whiting, Simmons, Havens, Smith, & Oka, 2009](#)).

3. Perpetrator typology

Researchers have noted major differences in domestic violence perpetrators, and several typologies have been independently developed to categorize and understand these differences ([Capaldi & Kim, 2007](#); [Dutton, 1995](#); [Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994](#); [Waltz, Babcock, Jacobson, & Gottman, 2000](#)). For example, [Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart \(1994\)](#) proposed a model that separates perpetrators into three distinct categories: generally violent, family-only, and dysphoric/borderline perpetrators; however, [Capaldi and Kim \(2007\)](#) have argued that three categories are unnecessary, believing there to be a lot of overlap between the generally violent and dysphoric/borderline perpetrators. [Cadsky and Crawford \(1988\)](#) found support for two typologies, those who assault only their partners (e.g., 'family only'), and those who assault their partners and others (e.g., 'generally violent').

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