

The Cycle of Violence

Name

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I. The Cycle of Violence in Relation to Human Behavior

Human behavior can be defined as the collection of behaviors displayed by human beings, which result to individual qualities such as genetics and attitude, or social standards such as culture, philosophies, ethics, laws and social relationships. Human behavior can be classified as that which is considered normal, unusual or acceptable; in sociology, behavior in itself is meaningless until directed at others. Human behavior is studied in the disciplines of psychology, sociology, economics, and anthropology.

The cycle of violence, from a psychological perspective, is a behavior pattern that is deemed unacceptable. It is a resultant pattern caused by particular influences and expressed in particular circumstances such as intimate relationships. The cycle of violence theory has a basis on human behavior as a whole: it explains how human behavior can be influenced by certain factors like other people's behavior, as well as the component phases of the individual's own behavior (Walker, 2009). There is a link between early exposure to violence and victimization and the resultant antisocial behavior, which is the cycle of violence. Children that experience abuse at an early age acquire deviant patterns by which they process social information, and this may result in the manifestation of aggressive behavior. If we understand this process, we can interrupt its intergenerational transmission and stop any further violence from taking place. Understanding it is also relevant since the knowledge that will be gathered can help lessen its prevalence in society.

II. The Origin of the Cycle of Violence Theory

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was the proponent of the Conflict Theory, which states that conflict is an inherent part of human nature and that human existence is itself contradictory. Feminists later applied the Conflict Theory to gender relations, including male-female inequalities in the family unit. By the 1970s, the Conflict Theory had made its way into mainstream family studies, examining such topics as husband – wife conflicts, parent – children conflicts, sibling relations, family disputes over inheritance, violence in the family and barriers against women in higher education. There might be a connection between the Conflict Theory and the cycle of violence. This could be an area of further study in the future.

The cycle of violence theory was proposed in the early nineteen sixties; it suggested that children who are raised in violent circumstances will turn violent as they grow older. Communities that exhibited high levels of child abuse also showed higher recurrence of adult violence. Two varying outcomes of studies in this subject have since been presented: some studies showed a large number of children exposed to violence did not necessarily turn out to be violent while others indicated the opposite. However, recent studies have found a close link between early trauma and adult criminality. In particular, a close association exists between childhood sexual abuse and adult sex offenders, where children who experienced sexual abuse continue to experience or perpetuate the same later in life.

In the 1970's, researcher and feminist Lenore Walker used the cycle of violence theory in relation to domestic violence (Devine, 2008). Her theory was based on interviews with women

from the United States who had been in abusive relationships. Walker's goal was to describe and predict what patterns the relationships often fall into. She identified three basic phases in these relationships:

1. The honeymoon phase

According to Walker (2009), violent relationships started at a stage where the abuser will use all means possible to entice and gratify his victim.

2. The tension-building phase

In the next phase, the abuser slides into a phase of restlessness within the relationship. He or she may exhibit extreme jealousy, anger and paranoia. The victim will generally respond by attempting to placate the abuser but most of the times, it will be to no avail.

3. The acting out phase

This phase is also referred to as the explosive stage. The abuser bursts out into physical attacks, verbal threats and delivers emotional mistreatment. At this stage, the victim is too frightened to seek help. According to Walker, the acting out stage links back to the honey moon stage, explaining the reason behind why victims find it hard to leave their abusers. The abuser can be extremely charming at the honeymoon stage. As the cycle goes on, each phase gets shorter and the cycle gets tighter. The pressure increases on the victim until they either escape or get fatally injured.

Walker's theory received a fair amount of criticism because her sample group was not considered large and diverse enough to sufficiently represent the scenario. Other criticisms also claimed that the cycle was too predictable, because some abusers could rely on verbal and

emotional abuse only without resorting to physical violence. Regardless, Walker's cycle still shed some light on abusive behavior at the time of the study and has been developed over time to include a more elaborate cycle (Devine, 2008).

III. Present Day usage of The Cycle of violence Theory

The cycle of violence theory has been used to explain a variety of scenarios, starting from the contribution of parent – child abuse in producing violent future generations, especially in domestic violence. The term “cycle of violence” has been used in two ways to refer to two models of domestic violence and abusive behavior. One of its usages is in reference to the explanation that children who live with domestic violence learn that abuse is acceptable. It goes on to explain that as children grow, they tend to become perpetrators of violence and abuse themselves. Many argue that the true picture is more complicated than this. While experiencing domestic violence, the children's response is varied and dependent on other factors such as their age, their race, culture, sex individuality and level of development. By no means do all children respond alike. A varied range of responses that children exhibit as a result of violence include guilt, anger, depression, fear, confusion, a feeling of powerlessness and insecurity. Some children, when they get older, may enter into non-violent but unhealthy relationships (Womensaid.org).

The second application of the term “cycle of violence” is in the description of the cyclical model of the abusive intimate relationship as described by Walker in 1970. In this case, the abuse intensifies, often leading to physical or sexual violence; this is then followed by the honeymoon

stage, often characterized by remorse and pleas for forgiveness. The abuser promises never to repeat the violence. However, since they are caught up in a self-perpetrating 'wheel', the tension begins to build gradually to another climax of abuse. The honeymoon phase is a part and parcel of a continuous pattern of power and control. The abuser uses his expressions of remorse to absolve himself from the responsibility of his actions, and manipulates his partner into forgiving him and staying in the relationship. This model has been said to be relevant in only some circumstances, therefore it cannot be universally applicable (Womensaid, 2007).

Currently, a major use of the Cycle of violence theory is in the study and control of female aggression. Seifart (2008) discusses this cycle of violence among women in the wake of heightened female violence and aggression. Teen females are most likely to exhibit violence if they come from violent families. A study on the subject showed that adult females with histories of violence had moderate to severe behavior problems that started before the age of 13. Other manifestations are in the form of delinquency, running away from home, assault of an authority figure, substance abuse, practice of legitimacy of aggression as a means to an end, poor social skills, attachment problems, fewer peers, behavior problems at school, problems at home or work, lack of success in school, at work or as a home maker, family violence and lack of warmth in the family of origin, lack of right boundaries in the family, and parents with psychiatric problems. In addition, women with severe assault backgrounds that had caused harm or death to another had a history that included escape from a facility, running away from home and bullying. A portion of those with chronic assaults had the following factors in common: lack of remorse for actions taken, a strong belief in antisocial behavior, excessive emotional displays, deviant peers, and absenteeism from school or work, among other tendencies mentioned earlier.

According to the study, it appeared that the recurrence and the severity of traumas that a woman experienced were closely related to the frequency and severity of behavior problems. The common factor behind all this was that most of these women came from dysfunctional homes, most of which were characterized by violence.

The well-being of a society is related to its ability to care for and educate its future generations. Neglect, abuse and violence in childhood contribute directly to violence by both men and women. Early identification and intervention can break this cycle. By saying this, the behavior is not excused but explained. The repercussions of violence in the family such as child death cannot be ignored and must therefore be acted upon by a civilized society through such interventions as therapy and family support. Perhaps this situation is further exacerbated by what is referred to as 'loss of societal capital', which is exhibited in the disintegration of the family unit (Schwartz, 2004). The family is identified as a unit of social stability which can be relied on to hold off violence through its ability to socialize and garner resources for the same purpose. The changing family structure creates family disorganization thus advancing a chaotic society. The father-absent family may exhibit weak social and economic control and is therefore ill equipped to perform its role. Singer et al (2004) says that lack of guardianship and supervision leads to unacceptable behavior, as children are starved of important role modeling that influences positive behavior. Fathers, when present, play key roles in their communities which include providing security to their families and modeling acceptable behavior to their children. The lack of a resident father figure in the family unit results in obvious deleterious tendencies. Children that grow in father-absent homes tend to exhibit behavioral problems that may lead to violence, thus feeding the Cycle of violence. There is considerable evidence that suggests that the Cycle of

violence hypothesis explains how aggressive behavior is transmitted and maintained within a family.

The term is also used in parent – child relationships. Now more than ever, the cycle of violence is evident in the family unit and also in intergenerational transmission. According to Seifart (2008), if a society cannot care for its young, the seeds of violence and criminality are being nurtured on a daily basis. There is a need to help provide services that will enable parents to take care of their children, and until this is done, the nation will continue building prisons at a higher cost than the cost that would be incurred in dealing with the root cause of the problem. Some researchers have argued that there is no definite cause and effect rule on the issue that abused children are more likely to exhibit violent behavior, juvenile delinquency and adult criminality. Widom (1989), concluded in her study that abused and neglected children are definitely at higher risks of social problems; however, in this relationship one can speculate how the learning of an abused child is internalized and acted out.

Other researchers have also argued that the development of aggressive behavior is more complex than one may think. According to Pepler and Rubin (1991), behavior is a result of various interactions between personal, environmental and structural factors resulting in various outcomes that will often differ with every individual. Pinpointing one factor as the contributing factor to aggressive behavior is thus made difficult. It seems reasonable to conclude that children learn violence by being exposed to it either through abuse or as they watch violence being perpetrated by others around them. These studies conclude that it may not be conclusive to go by the cycle of violence completely.

The cycle of violence hypothesis fails to explain other outcomes of child neglect or abuse. As indicated earlier, a child may end up exhibiting other non-violent tendencies such as withdrawal and self-destructiveness. A serious challenge for this hypothesis is the argument that most children who experience child abuse and neglect do not necessarily become offenders. Studies indicate, however, that the occurrence of these factors increases the risk of delinquency and criminal behavior. At the same time, a large number of abused children exhibit no criminal behavior or get arrested for violent acts. But it is undeniable that a strong link exists between child abuse and neglect and the manifestation of aggression, deficits in problem solving skills and social cognitive competencies (Sawyer et al., 2002).

James (2008) wrote that a study carried out on domestic violence could not link the theory that battered men and women exhibited certain traits in common. The sample of battered women did not automatically show that they had come from abusive childhoods. It did, however, show that a woman who experienced domestic violence held on to the traditional understanding of the role of a woman that their parents had exhibited. There is a tendency in women who were abused in childhood to choose partners who exhibit familiar qualities to them and in the process seek out partners who are likely to be violent. As a result, these women continue to experience intimate partner violence in their adulthood (Gonzalez, 2008).

In the relationship, the women may either become the victims or the aggressors. In the past, it was shameful for men to say that they were battered by their spouses, but the frequencies have become so common that the issue can no longer be ignored. Focus on the girl child and battered

women have now been expanded to include the boy child and battered men. Therefore, in a family setting the cycle of violence theory may apply to either the victim or the aggressor regardless of gender and, in rare circumstances, it may even apply to both of them.

IV. Unanswered Question

The cycle of violence theory has been applied to war. War and terrorism are abnormal occurrences that affect normal populations resulting in severe stress and adverse reactions. Irrational fears and suspicions may cause a group with a common background such as ethnicity to attack another in an attempt to eliminate a so-called “enemy”, thus setting off a cycle of violence in the region or around the world. Unfortunately, this pattern is repeated over and over with every generation across that region.

It has been argued with reservations that humans are aggressive, violent and war-like. Such a belief is detrimental to many, especially when used to advance the interests of the ruling elites for political or economic gain. Many have argued that the culture of human beings and not their instinct drives them to war. Repeated acts of terrorism have a cumulative effect on victims such as increasing the intensity of response and lengthening the period of time it would take to recover. Among other devastating effects of war, millions of children have been maimed, killed, lost their parents or have been displaced. It has been argued that children recover rapidly from the effects of manmade and natural disasters, and their response to such heightened events is generally milder than would be expected. However, this argument has been nullified by recent

studies by clinicians and researchers on the short and long-term effects of war on children (Leavitt and Fox, 1993).

War results in a variety of biological effects in children such as malnutrition, suffering from war related injuries and starvation. Developmental deficiencies such as cognitive impairment, changes in personality and even the central nervous system may be experienced. Children that survive war are affected emotionally, psychologically and socially. There may be externalized behavior or no reaction, both of which are a sign of a problem. The extent to which a child is affected can be heightened or lessened by the level of exposure to the violence. Any changes in their 'safe nest' – that is, the family, cultural and religious factors – affect the specific make up and personality type of the child. The level of desensitization, truancy and substance abuse as a result of extreme and constant exposure to violence may be heightened, resulting in the perpetration of further violence by the 'former' victims, whereby the hunter now becomes the hunted.

Tragically, there may be a lost generation as a result of war, explaining the large numbers of missing fathers in the family units as seen in some societies. There must be an effect on the young children who lose one or both parents and close relatives as a result of war. Research has now moved to study violence that has been politicized in order to explain the continued existence of the violence, as seen in countries like Somalia. Children are, by these circumstances, no longer observers of the activities of war but are themselves socialized into war. A case study of the gulf war observed the presentation of war and violence to children in this manner as gruesome. Images of war being flashed on the screens of media houses across the globe meant

that children were from a distance experiencing the devastation of war. An in depth study on the psychological effects of war on children is an area of study experiencing a surprising scarcity of research information. Of particular interest would be to assess the short and long term psychological effects on children experiencing early parental death in war, plus the resultant contributions of this to the cycle of violence in that region.

Leavitt and Fox (1993) say that understanding the effects of violence related to war in children is of extreme importance to the civilized society. As in all wars, the forgotten victims are always the children. Though not able to express themselves, the risk of brushing off the effect of war on children is equivalent to ignoring a time bomb. Research in this area should aim at a knowledgeable basis for treatment of children coming out of such circumstances. The information must be used to develop suitable integrated approaches to deal with the psychological trauma that children who are exposed to war require. According to ASI (2002), it is important to outline the details on the latest studies in the subject. This works to ease the process of identifying gaps in research that are in need of in depth analysis in solving this crisis.

In conclusion, we can say that having knowledge and utilizing it, is power. It is through the sharing of this knowledge that society can sensitize itself on the issues raised thus helping prevent the perpetration of further violence. If populations are educated on the effects of their actions and the opportunities lost for them as a result, they may turn around and seek to resolve conflict and disagreements in more suitable and acceptable ways.

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