Breaking Down the Social Learning of Domestic Violence

Ali Akbar Rahmatian, PhD •*

Objective: The purpose of this study was to identify reasons domestic violence occurs within intimate relationships.

Methods: The target group was female victims and male offenders. The offenders group consisted of 25 men from a batterer's intervention group. The victims group composed of 9 women from Center Against Spouse Abuse (CASA) intervention group.

Results: Domestic violence occurred at a higher rate in intimate relationships where either the victim or offender has been exposed to prior domestic violence. A higher percentage of victimized women were in a lower economic class than male offenders.

Conclusion: Domestic violence perpetuates the future cycle of violence.

Introduction

In a 1997 report there were "At least 4 million reported incidents of domestic violence against women every year" [1]. Before the 1970's wife beating received very little attention in the journals [2-4]. Nowadays, domestic violence is a worldwide major social and health concern [5-9]. The prevalence of domestic violence is believed to be higher in the developing countries [5,7,10-17]. According to the United Nation's report, 27-60 percent of women are injured or maltreated by their husbands [5]. The majority of metropolitan police departments in the US practice a preferred arrest policy when dealing with offenders of domestic violence. There are organizations, which provide assistance and counseling to victims and their offenders, many of which are supported by State or Federal moneys, such as Center Against Spouse Abuse (CASA), a victim's crisis intervention program.

To gain a greater understanding of what drives one to commit domestic violence, we need to look no further than Ronald Akers'

Social Learning Theory. Domestic Violence is not due to a chemical imbalance, nor can we blame it totally on alcohol, drugs, depression, or a host of similar characteristics. Those who have witnessed domestic violence in the past are likely to be involved in future acts of domestic violence [1].

The first concept of the social learning theory is differential association- the process whereby one is exposed to normative definitions favorable or unfavorable to illegal or law-abiding behavior [18]. Differential association, which identifies two behavioral dimensions, interactional and normative, outlines the offender's early association with domestic violence. Second concept defines and explains how an individual develops his or her own meanings to a specific behavior. These definitions have been identified as both general and specific. The third concept to be explored is differential reinforcement, which "Refers to the balance of anticipated or actual rewards and punishments that follow or are consequences of behavior." [19]. Imitation, which is the fourth concept of the social learning theory, "Refers to the engagement in behavior after the oberservation of similar behavior in others." [1].

Makars` findings correlate to Akers` social learning theory. The concept of definitions

Authors' affiliations : Webster University, Lakeland, Florida USA

•**Corresponding author :** Ali Akbar Rahmatian, PhD, Graduate faculty, Webster University USA.

Tel : +18636879309

E-mail: lrahmatian01238@gmail.com

explains the attitudes of women Makar describes in her study. Women rationalize why they are battered, and give justification to the batterers` behavior. A woman may have general beliefs about family values or the way she is to treat her partner that gives insight to her reasoning, stating "It was my fault" or "I deserved it." She cited that demographics features can not be related to or predict abuse to women: "The majority of battered women surveyed were intelligent and well-educated- or at least more educated than their batterers". She suggested that women who are abused generally have a low self esteem and hold traditional views about their role within the household. She even indicates that though career oriented, battered women feel they are often responsible for the offenders behavior and in fact deny the anger they feel toward the offender (20).

Though Makars` findings are relevant, Murphy and O'Farrell found through empirical evidence that there was a direct correlation between alcoholism and domestic violence (21). They identified three explanatory models of alcoholism and domestic violence. The first deals with alcohols` ability to reduce cognitive ability, the second deals with preexisting antisocial behavior, and the third deals with the influences that alcohol has on marital intimacy, stress, and financial obligations. Of the three, the second and the third models are associated to Akers` social learning theory.

Prior exposure to violence is important in understanding a batterers` or victims social learning processes. This becomes increasingly important when measuring domestic violence among ethnic minorities. African Americans for example, had to deal with traumatic experiences, endure lynching, war atrocities, race riots, sexual abuse, and murder from the Colonial period and even through the millennium. In a study conducted by Carolyn West, she concluded three reasons for assessing a families` history of violence. The first reason she provided was that, "Prior exposure to violence", such as living in high crime areas, may elevate the effects of a crisis, including partner violence. Secondly, interviews about partner violence may trigger memories of traumatic historic events. The third reason is that second and third generations may minimize

partner abuse when they compare it to earlier family and historical traumas (22).

The purpose of this study was that if those who have committed domestic violence or who have been victims of it as juveniles will continue the cycle. A survey is done to address the relationship between the domestic violence offenders and victims- issues ranging from demographics, to punishments for offenders. However, the target of the survey is to find out if domestic violence is directly related to social learning as opposed to a spontaneous behavior, one picks up on his own or in the heat of the moment.

Materials and Methods

The target group of this research was female victims and male offenders. The offenders group encompassed 25 men from a batters` intervention group- 12 men from a Palm Harbor, Florida intervention group and 13 from a group in Largo, Florida. The victims group composed of 9 women from the CASA intervention group in St. Petersburg, Florida. The respondents in the survey were given the same questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised of twenty closed ended questions and one open-ended question. Some questions dealt directly with the concepts of Akers` social learning theory, while others asked specific questions on demographic variables (age, ethnicity, gender, education, and income). Of the questions asked some dealt specifically with historical information, such as prior exposure to domestic violence within the family. This was important as the intent was to access whether or not the victim and offenders exhibited any patterns of domestic violence among their parents and/or grandparents. With the information obtained from the survey, a cross sectional study was conducted in March 2007. The open-ended questions were for the respondent to express their true feelings on domestic violence in the survey. The targeted questions for analysis were questions 3-8 and 19. These questions addressed previous experiences with domestic violence as a victim, witness, or offender as well as family abuse. Question 19 asks specifically if the respondents felt that domestic violence was a learned behavior. Finally, in reviewing

the surveys and conducting analysis, each survey was tested against Akers' theory of social learning and its four concepts (differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitational). Social learning deals with several elements among those are the definition we attach to positive and negative behaviors and anticipated rewards and punishment for a specific action.

Results

The information gathered from the research answered specific questions about the respondent's predisposition to domestic violence. For example, of the 25 male offenders surveyed, 16 (64%) stated they have a family member who had been a victim of domestic violence. Of the 9 female victims surveyed, 7 (78%) indicated that they have a family member who had been a victim of domestic violence. Similar information gathered pertaining to members of the family who had been offenders of domestic violence. Of the male offenders surveyed, 12 (48%) indicated that a family member had previously engaged in domestic violence. Research indicated that, of the female victims, 6 (67%) indicated that they have a member in their family who had committed an act of domestic violence. The male respondents (offenders) indicated that 18 (72%) of them had been previously exposed to domestic violence as a juvenile; while only 7 (28%) indicated that their first exposure was as an adult. The female respondent showed that, of the 9 people surveyed, 6 (67%) indicated that their first exposure to domestic violence was as a juvenile, while only 3 (34%) stated their first experience was as an adult. Pertaining to the respondent's first experience, 18 (71%) of the offenders stated their first experience was as a witness, 1 (4%) stated as a victim, and 6 (25%) stated as an offender. Victims responded by indicating that 4 (45%) had their first experience as a witness, 5 (55%) as a victim, and none respondent as an offender. Another interesting point in the survey was the direct question on whether or not the respondents felt domestic violence was a behavior we learn from others. The offenders surveyed responded with

4 (14%) indicating that they strongly agreed, 11 (38%) agreed, another 11 (38%) were uncertain, 3 (10%) disagreed, and 0% responded that they strongly disagreed. The victims responded with 5 (55.5%) strongly agreeing, 0% agreeing, 4 (44.5%) being uncertain, and 0% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. The respondents were also asked questions pertaining to demographics, such as the range of the offenders and victim's income. The income of the respondents varied greatly, with 9 (31%) of the offenders group earning $35,000-$49,999 per year, while the largest income category in the victims group reporting earning less than $10,000 per year or 5 (55.5%) of the victims groups total population. It should be noted that another unique point was the ethnicity of the treatment groups. Caucasian Americans encompassed 26 (89%) of the offenders group and 6 (67%) of the victims group. African Americans combined for a total of 2 (7%) of the population in the offenders and 2 (22%) in the victims group. The age of the offenders and victims also varied greatly. Offenders in the age bracket of 34-41 recorded 31% of the groups of the total population and the same age bracket was consistent with the victims encompassing 33% of the group's total population (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographics Characteristic of Offender and Victims

	Offenders	Victims
Yearly Income ($/year)		
>10,000	3	4
10,000-19,999	4	0
20,000-34,999	2	3
35,000-49,999	8	0
50,000-64,999	2	1
65,000-79,999	0	0
80,000-94,999	2	0
95,000-109,999	1	0
110,000-149,999	1	0
150,000-200,000	0	0
>200,000	1	0
Ethnicity		
White	21	6
Black	2	2
Hispanic	1	1
Age		
> 18	0	0
18-25	1	1
26-33	8	2
34-41	9	3
42-49	6	2
50-57	1	0
57-64	0	0
>64		

Discussion

The present study revealed that domestic violence occurs at a higher rate in intimate relationships where either the victim or offender has been exposed to prior domestic violence, as opposed to those that have not been exposed. Demographics such as social class, ethnicity, gender, education, and income may have had an influence on the offenders and juveniles` response. Some of the variables were controlled for through the closed end questions on the surveys and do not appear to have biased the results. Through specific closed ended responses from victims surveyed in our study, it was found that a higher percentage of victimized women were in a lower economic class than male offenders. The level of education between the victims and offenders was relatively the same. One question asked in the survey dealt with the respondent's first exposure to domestic violence. This is an important issue in regards to the social learning theory in that before the learning process can take place, the subject must first be exposed to the behavior. Ronald Akers` social learning theory dissects the behaviors associated with domestic violence and answers several of the questions associated with both the victims and offenders behavior. In retrospect, research on domestic violence is headed in the right direction. Social learning will prove to be very successful if implemented on a larger scale utilizing simple random samples of a population; however, until then, issues concerning domestic violence will continue to concentrate on the victim, with minimal assistance to the offender and children. The most widespread treatment available to the offender is not treatment at all; that is the preferred arrest policy. Preferred arrest is a great tool for law enforcement in order to place a temporary band-aid on the problem, but it does not address long term issues related to the behavior of the offender and victim. Old programs will go by the wayside. It is evident that more attention should be directed towards education and awareness. Intervention can be successful if addressed at an early age. Studies should be conducted in the grade schools in order to measure those exposed to domestic violence. In recent years, service providers and scholars have begun to recognize the importance of being sensitive to racial, ethnic, and cultural differences in order to design effective out reach strategies, therapeutic intervention programs, and criminal justice policies (4,23).

Of the male offenders, 48% reported that a family member had previously engaged in domestic violence, while 67% female victims indicated the above formal abuse. Of the offenders group 72% indicated the first exposure as a juvenile and 28% as an adult, while 45% of the victims reported their first experience as a witness and 55% as a victim. Research indicated that many men who batter live in a childhood home where violence was present (1). They learned through childhood and societal conditioning that it is acceptable to use violence against women (24). Murphy and O'Farrell's study is relevant to social learning in that what caused the violent alcoholics to indulge in alcohol abuse in the first place. The hostility towards spouses was only perpetuated by their inability to contain their own negative feelings (1,2,19). Kratcoski utilizing a social psychological model, specifically, applied stress and learning theory to family violence, noted that learning theory and its application to early childhood experiences and the transmission to behavior patterns later in life, also formed the foundation for inter-generational transmission of violence (25). These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that the experience of physical harm leads a child to conceptualize the world in deviant ways that later perpetuate the cycle of violence of a batterer. Specifically, batterers appear to be vulnerable to engaging in negative social interactions that have the potential for violence (25).

With the understanding of the legal definitions pertaining to domestic violence, victims and offenders in the present study were given the surveys without having to summate their own or previously described definitions. Though a random sample was not obtained from the targeted population due to time constraints, budget, and personnel complications, a select group of volunteers from victim and offender treatment programs participated in the study.

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