

Child to Parent Violence- The need and importance of a multi disciplinary approach

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Abstract:

The paper is a conceptual note based on researcher's personal experience with clients who seek assistance for dealing with interpersonal issues related to child-parent conflict. Apart from drawing major concepts related to child-parent relationship issues, the paper attempted to extend its viewpoints by borrowing explanations from major theoretical strands such as Parent Offspring Conflict Theory (POCT), System theory, etc. Moreover, it concludes with remarks indicating the relevance of conducting studies on interpersonal tensions between parent and child. Legitimizing the multi disciplinary understanding of the issue, the paper concludes with reminding the practitioners to develop individual specific strategies for intervention.

Keywords: Child, Parent, Child-Parent Conflict, Parent-child interaction, Parent-child relationship

Introduction

This paper is based on the researcher's own experiences as a social worker and psychotherapist in a tertiary level health care center in Kerala, India. During the psychotherapy sessions with adolescent clients, their parents disclosed about their own inability to manage and control the undesired and violent outbursts of their children. Such incidences marked by a wide range of behavior including shouting, threatening, breaking valuables, self harm threatening and often physically attacking the parents too. The major challenge encountered during the psychotherapy sessions was the lack of suitabil-

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ity of the currently practicing therapeutic strategies/methods. Even though studies related to similar issues were scanty among Asians and especially Indian population, both researchers and practitioners now showing interest in considering the seriousness of the problem with future implications (Hong et.al, 2012, Wilcox et.al, 2015). Since the problem is multipronged, the researcher made an attempt to understand the problem in different viewpoints. Moreover, the researcher also curious about the way practitioners assesses and intervenes with child to parent violence.

Theoretical Background

Theories on gender dimensions in interpersonal relations, parenting styles, parent's authority, and the dynamics of power and relationship in families have been found helpful in imparting an insight for researchers involved in the development of novel practices in dealing with the child-parent conflict and violence. Conceptualizing child-parent violence as an abuse of power in his/her own family environment by the child in the context of prevailing socio-cultural norms. Similarly, the influential aspect of such an abuse of power by the child in their own family, mode of parenting, exercise of parental authority, etc provides the practitioners ample scope for framing up of innovative techniques to effectively deal child-parent conflicts (Coogan, 2015).

Any attempt to understand the theoretical strands on child-parent conflict began with untangling the theoretical knowledge and empirical achievements made by the seminal work by Trivers (1974) popularly known as Parent Offspring Conflict Theory (POCT). Though the theory has not been applied to social sciences for years, it has far-reaching implications for understanding conflict between children and their parents as well as between siblings. It ranges from explaining pre-natal conflict over physiological resources, to weaning conflict and its resolution, conflict among siblings for getting more care and attention from their parents, conflicts over adolescents' choice of sexual and romantic partners, and so on.

As a widely applied theory in social sciences, systems theory propound-

ed that relationships among family members should be considered dynamic rather than static traits (Sameroff, 1995). Building on this theory, as parent-child conflict persists, children's socio-emotional dysfunction would be expected to be reinforced by negative patterns of interaction with their parents (Schlomer, et al. 2011). In turn, children would not only be influenced by their parents (Bell, 1968), but likely try to change their family environments by further eliciting trenchant interactions from their parents, establish a coercive cycle (Patterson, 1982; Shaw & Bell, 1993). Moreover, according to the family stress model (Conger et al., 2002), economically disadvantaged families may be especially vulnerable to these patterns of dysfunction. Further, they (Conger et al., 2002) theorize that economic hardship and pressure elicit parental emotional problems, which in turn precipitate inter-parental conflict and withdrawal. Problems in the parenting dyad are then translated into negative parenting strategies, which ultimately lead to child maladjustment (Conger et al., 2002). Such a complex consequence of negative family processes would likely to produce problems in the parent-child relationship, including increased conflict. Conceptualizing risk of such maladaptive problem behavior from a dynamic perspective within the context of economic disadvantages of the family suggests how complex the task of identifying family processes as one of the causes of child's socio-emotional dysfunction.

Burt et al. (2005) investigated the emergence of coercive patterns of parent-child interaction among a large sample of 11-14 year old Caucasian twin pairs with the intention of addressing the link between parent-child conflict and child disruptive problem behavior from a dynamic framework. Examining cross-lagged paths, the authors (Burt et al., 2005) found that initial levels of both conflict and disruptive problems independently predicted the other at age 14, suggesting an environmental "downward spiral" effect. In a more recent study among a sample of predominantly white adoptive families, quite different pattern was identified by Klahr et al. (2011) that, parent-child conflict predicted the development of conduct problems 4 years later. But conduct problems did not predict increased parent-child conflict, suggesting that the parent-child relationship is the driving force in the emergence of conduct problems, as op-

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posed to the child's behavior evoking negative parental interactions. Furthermore, Trentacosta et al. (2011) found that there were four distinct trajectory groups of mother-son conflict from middle childhood to adolescence among a sample of at-risk, ethnically diverse families. The chronically high and high decreasing conflict groups demonstrated higher rates of antisocial behaviors at age 15 compared to the moderate and low conflict groups, suggesting that how conflict changes over time differentially impacts adolescent problem behavior. Concluding the above mentioned empirical findings, it is clear that the presence of elevated parent-child conflict during the school-age period and early adolescence is related to later child behavior problems. Considering the changes that has been happening to our family structure and composition, parent-child relationship and children's way of responding to parental control the problem demands a multi disciplinary approach to propose innovative outcomes.

Need for a Sociological Viewpoint

Any attempt to view the problem through a Sociological lens may eventually leads to identifying and emphasizing the meaning of terms and concepts associated with. Here, the topic demands an eye on the nature and extent of violence initiated by the child towards his/her parent(s). More specifically, the violence that taking place within the family between child and parent(s). As Loseke (2005) emphasized, there is a need to clarify the meaning of the family since it is the context of all these relationship issues. Similarly, one needs to make more clarity on the terms such as child, parent, and violence. The nature, size and type of relations existed in the family where the child has been exposing to during his/her formative years, marital status of parent(s), nature and extent of interaction between parents and towards child/children, etc contributes different physical and psychological experiences to the child. Equally important in this regard is the meaning one has been attributed to the term 'violence' in the context of family. As a natural social process siblings

rivalry and violence among them (Omer et al., 2008) on trivial matters are often considered as normal and legitimate considering the age and seriousness of the arguments they made. Similarly, there is violence among classmates or during certain sports events that happened in less frequent ways. It becomes more serious and needs more attention once it crosses the limit of legitimacy and takes up the form of something abusive resulting in victimization of the affected party.

Relevance of a Psychological Approach

Cottrell (2001) defined the term child to parent violence as any harmful act carried out by a child (child under the age of 18 years) with the intention to cause physical, psychological, or financial pain or to exert power and control over a parent (Wilcox et al., 2015). Looking through a psychological lens will certainly help to examine and understand the real intentions/motivations of the child who initiated such abusive attempts. The tactics of violence and abusive behavior used by some children can also be viewed as a continuum of direct and indirect attacks (Coogan, 2015). Indirect forms of these abusive behaviors take the level of damaging and breaking the valuables or to the maximum level threatening or attempting self harm. Direct attacks involve physical assault to the parent(s) that aggravates in stabbing those using sharp objects or weapons resulting in medical casualties (Coogan, 2015). It is equally worthwhile to make an understanding on the multi-cultural context in parent-child relationship.

Various studies (Chao, 1995, Leichtman, et al., 2009) conducted among European- American parents identified their willingness to openly express emotions and also facilitate the children to discuss their own feelings too. Chao's (1995) study further reported an opposite view held by Asian parents, often advising and compelling their children to suppress their emotions and resulting behaviors. The same study (Chao, 1995) also observed that Chinese parents inculcate their children on the ways to become more sensitive to the emotions of other's. They often express their parental affection by paying more attention and involvement in the overall development of the Child.

Importance of a Social Work Understanding

There is a growing need to make the people more informed about the forms of abuse and violence in families. As a matter of policy, it is the responsibility of the policy makers to take initiatives to develop interventions/ novel practices to protect and enable the victims to deal such situations more effectively. The national policies also explicitly states that most incidences of domestic violence and abuse perpetrated by man against women while acknowledging the cases of male victims of female perpetrated abuse and also the crime towards sexual minorities. The discriminatory care towards elderly and associated elder mistreatment is certain areas of concern.

Conclusion

The discussion and review done so far pointed out the need and importance of a multi disciplinary approach in effectively dealing the issue of child-parent violence right from conceptualizing the key terms. Considering the scarcity of literature on the problem studied, the researcher suggesting the necessity of initiating more empirical studies using Grounded theory approaches. Equally important in this regard is the analysis of gender composition and the resulting dynamics in the relationship between a boy child to his father, boy child to his mother, girl child to her father and also with her mother. Similar dynamics can be observed between a boy or girl and his or her step father or step mother. Further, the paper asked the need for developing novel and individual specific techniques that can effectively influence the ambivalence of the children with the history of frequent conflict with parents.

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