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Sherry Hamby · John Grych

The Web of Violence

Exploring Connections
Among Different
Forms of Interpersonal
Violence and Abuse



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Exploring Connections Among Different
Forms of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse

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Chapter 1

The Case for Studying Co-occurrence

The Cost of Compartmentalization

For decades, research examining different forms of interpersonal violence has proceeded in relative isolation. Large literatures have been generated on child maltreatment, bullying, intimate partner violence, teen dating violence, sexual violence, and elder abuse with few systematic efforts to understand connections among them. There are exceptions, such as work investigating links between intimate partner violence and child physical abuse, but for the most part, each field of study has developed its own conceptual models, knowledge base, and approaches to intervention. There are historical reasons that these “silos” have developed; different forms of violence have come to public and scientific attention at different times, and the initial work on each understandably sought to document the nature and extent of the problem and to identify ways to prevent it or aid its victims. Although much has been learned about each type of violence, the propensity for research, services, and even entire institutions to organize around single forms of violence or a few closely related types has significant costs as well.

By focusing in on particular types of violence, the field as a whole has failed to recognize the extent to which different forms of interpersonal violence are connected across contexts, over the lifespan from birth through adulthood, and in the lives of victims, perpetrators, and those involved in violence as both victim and perpetrator. Disciplinary silos slow the advance of scientific progress by restricting the flow of information about the causes and correlates of different forms of violence, resulting in the repeated reinvention of conceptual and methodological wheels and reduced opportunities for researchers in one subfield to learn from the insights gleaned in others. Studying the interconnections of different violence types can lead to more comprehensive understanding of how and why violence occurs and to more effective approaches to reducing the number of children, women, and men who become victims.

There have been studies documenting co-occurrence of different forms of violence in a surprisingly large number of disciplines of violence scholarship and

practice, but most have addressed only two fairly specific forms of violence, and disciplinary silos and hyper-specialization have meant that this scholarship generally has been conducted in isolation from other work on co-occurrence. Although there have been calls to focus more on the relations among forms of violence in the past (Slep and Heyman 2001), only recently have there been concerted efforts to systematically assess the extent of interconnection across multiple forms of violence (e.g., Finkelhor et al. 2009). This work indicates that the overlap among different forms of violence, even seemingly diverse and unrelated forms, is so great that it can be difficult to identify a group of individuals who have sustained or perpetrated only a single form of violence (see Chap. 2). The high level of violence co-occurrence has important implications for research, intervention, and public policy, and the purpose of this book is to address how knowledge generated in multiple domains can be organized into a larger framework that illuminates the commonalities and patterns among them. We believe that greater recognition of these connections will lead to a more contextualized and comprehensive approach to research, prevention, and intervention on all forms of violence.

What is Gained by Focusing on Co-occurrence?

The most fundamental advantage of a co-occurrence perspective is that it more closely corresponds to the reality of many, if not most, people who are involved in violence in some way. Individuals do not carve up their experiences according to the disciplinary and subdisciplinary boundaries established by scientists, clinicians, and policymakers. Narrow labels misrepresent and minimize the true burden of violence. Awareness of the interconnections among different forms of violence will provide a more accurate understanding of how violence affects people's lives, which in turn will facilitate efforts to reduce violence and the suffering that it causes. In the next section, we briefly address the advantages of recognizing the interconnected nature of different forms of interpersonal violence for research and for practice.

Benefits for Research

More valid inferences. Studies of a particular type of violence typically identify victims on the basis of their experience with that type of violence, and infer that it is that type of victimization that is related to whatever outcomes are being studied. Any victim group, however, will include many individuals who have experienced victimization in several different domains at the hands of several different perpetrators. Consequently, although outcomes are typically attributed to the form of victimization that is the focus of the study, they are likely to be the result of multiple forms. The same issues hold for studies of perpetrators; single labels such as “batterer,” “bully,” or “rapist” will be incomplete depictions of many individuals' involvement in violence. Given the high degree of co-occurrence of all

forms of violence, studies that assess only a single type of violence and then label the group with that form are fundamentally inaccurate.

Even more disconcertingly, many participants in the comparison group are also likely to be victims of some type of violence and may have many characteristics in common with the “victim” group. Finding minimal differences between “victims” and “nonvictims,” or between “perpetrators” and “nonperpetrators,” can lead to the conclusion that the particular form of violence has little or no effect on whatever construct is the focus of the study. This conclusion could be erroneous if the ostensibly nonviolent group included individuals who had experienced forms of violence that were not assessed in the study but share many of the same risk factors and consequences as the form that was the focus of the study.

More sophisticated etiological models. Even a cursory scan of the major violence disciplines will reveal tremendous overlap in the constructs hypothesized to act as risk factors and causal processes. For example, growing up in a violent home is one of the best-supported etiological factors for both perpetration and victimization of violence across contexts. Some behaviors, such as substance abuse, put people at risk for everything ranging from becoming a victim of sexual assault to perpetrating property crimes. Although much has been learned about violence through the isolated study of these risk factors, decades of research now suggest that the main risk factors can be grouped into a few categories (see [Chap. 3](#)). A more integrated framework can provide additional insights into the magnitude of the associations between particular risk factors and particular types of violence, and would have direct implications for practice by identifying which malleable risk factors should be specifically targeted in prevention and intervention programs to produce the largest impact.

A co-occurrence framework is also best suited for distinguishing factors that may be unique to particular types of interpersonal violence from risk factors common to all forms of violence. Indeed, it is not possible to identify unique risk factors without an appreciation for the commonalities across forms of violence. In some cases, there might also be unique aspects to more general factors. For example, communication and negotiation skills have been identified as important for avoiding several forms of violence (as both victim and perpetrator), but specific skills, such as negotiating birth control use, might be important for avoiding some kinds of sexual aggression or reproductive coercion. More detail on this is presented in [Chap. 3](#).

More developmentally sensitive understanding of violence. Surprisingly, little attention has been given to the developmental context of many violence types. In many research studies and prevention programs, developmental context is implied simply by the targeted age range. Many bullying prevention programs are designed for middle school youth, for example, even though data do not suggest that the onset of bullying occurs in middle school. As we discuss in [Chap. 4](#), the roots of many forms of interpersonal aggression can be found in early childhood, where adverse experiences can increase children’s subsequent vulnerability to victimization and risk for perpetration. Tracing the interplay over time among cognitive, emotional, and biological factors, family processes, peer interactions, and the connections between victimization and perpetration can shed light on the common and unique risk factors for violence.