

## DO ABUSED CHILDREN BECOME ABUSIVE PARENTS?

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*The belief that abused children are likely to become abusive parents is widely accepted. The authors review the literature cited to support this hypothesis and demonstrate that its unqualified acceptance is unfounded. Mediating factors that affect transmission are outlined and the findings of several investigations are integrated to estimate the true rate of transmission.*

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The belief that abused children are likely to become abusive parents is widely accepted by professionals and lay people alike. It is noted in introductory psychology text books,<sup>41</sup> and advanced on radio and television commercials that advocate "the report of abuse to avoid the cycle of abuse." Despite the popularity of this belief, there is a paucity of empirical evidence to support the transmission formulation.

Many papers cited in support of the intergenerational hypothesis merely assert its validity without providing any substantive evidence.<sup>3, 4, 8, 15, 21, 39</sup> The remaining papers derive their data from four primary sources: case study materials, agency records, clinical interviews, and self-report questionnaires. The basic elements of these studies vary greatly, however. They differ in the subjects studied (identified abusers vs high risk populations vs nationally representative samples), in their definitions of "history of abuse" and "current abuse," in the experimental design employed (retrospective vs prospective), and in the type of

data sources utilized to substantiate claims of past and current abuse.

This paper critically reviews the literature cited in support of the intergenerational hypothesis. Throughout, the effects of variations in the research design of different studies are highlighted. A number of mediating factors that affect the likelihood of abuse occurring in successive generations are also briefly outlined. In conclusion, the findings of several studies are integrated to estimate the true rate of transmission. Numerous researchers have questioned the validity of the intergenerational hypothesis;<sup>5, 6, 13, 17, 19, 28, 33, 40</sup> this review demonstrates that its unqualified acceptance is unfounded.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Case History Studies*

Most papers that used case study materials were based on observations of parents whose children were treated in hospital emergency rooms for nonaccidental injuries.<sup>10, 12, 22</sup> A strong association between

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child maltreatment and a parental history of abuse was uniformly reported. The generalizability of these studies is limited, however, by researchers' failure to utilize: *a*) representative samples, *b*) comparison subjects, *c*) observers who were blind to the subjects' maltreatment status, *d*) formal definitional criteria for the terms "history of abuse" and "current abuse," or *e*) descriptive or inferential statistics in reporting research findings. Given these methodological problems, the findings of studies relying on case study materials as their primary data source must be interpreted with a high degree of caution.

#### *Agency Record Studies*

Agency record review studies were conducted to investigate the child-rearing practices of abusing families over several generations,<sup>25</sup> and to learn about the childhood experiences of parents whose children were brought to hospital emergency rooms for nonaccidental injuries.<sup>23, 27, 30</sup> Studies that employed record review procedures possess many of the same methodological problems as those that used case study materials. In addition, the findings of these studies are often difficult to interpret because omissions in agency records are rarely systematically recorded. For example, at the conclusion of one paper, the authors stated<sup>23</sup> "in all cases where information was available, the adults [in their study] had been subjected early in life to emotional deprivations" (p. 907). Since the authors failed to mention the number of cases for which there was information available, the significance of the clause "in all cases" cannot be determined. The reliability and validity of using agency reports to detect a parental history of child maltreatment has been questioned elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Since information pertaining to child-rearing histories is rarely recorded consistently within agencies, let alone across agencies, findings from record review studies are inevitably limited as well.

#### *Clinical Studies*

Of the clinical interview studies, Steele and Pollack's<sup>34</sup> work is probably the most widely referenced, despite the authors' cautionary note that their "study group of parents is not to be thought of as useful statistical proof of any concepts" (p. 90). Steele and Pollack interviewed 60 child abusing parents participating in a psychological treatment program. The authors reported that all the parents in their study were abused as children. In this study, however, a history of abuse was defined as being subjected to "intense, pervasive, and continual demands" from one's parents, a definition far from the legal criteria developed by the Juvenile Justice Standards Project.<sup>38</sup> Without an appropriate comparison group it is impossible to determine whether these experiences are unique to abusive parents, or simply true of most adults receiving psychological services. The number of adults who were subjected to similar childhood experiences and neither abuse their children nor receive psychological services cannot be ascertained from this study.

The findings of other studies<sup>14, 24</sup> that used clinical interviews as their primary data source are equally limited. While all these studies were undoubtedly valuable in generating hypotheses about the possible relationship between child maltreatment and abusive parenting, due to methodological problems, their findings simply cannot be considered conclusive evidence in support of the intergenerational hypothesis.

#### *Self-Report Studies*

The studies reviewed thus far were guided by the psychiatric model of abuse, which emphasizes aberrant parental characteristics to explain the etiology of child maltreatment. Studies that used self-report questionnaires moved beyond this conceptual approach to include multiple assessments reflective of investigators' broadening understanding of the factors associated with

the etiology of abuse. Factors identified by the socio-ecological model of abuse, such as poverty, stress, and isolation, were assessed, as were factors associated with the child-as-elicitor model which includes measures of infant prematurity and child temperament. Unfortunately, while comparison groups were consistently employed in these studies, and analyses conducted to assess the effects of the individual measures collected, the statistical relationships among the various determinants of abuse were rarely explored to determine the relative effects of the various factors examined.

In all the self-report studies reviewed, the dimension "a history of abuse" consistently differentiated the abusers from the comparison subjects.<sup>2, 7, 9, 11, 16, 18, 29, 31, 32, 35</sup> However, considerable overlap between these two groups was always reported. This suggests that, although a history of abuse is more common among parents who maltreat their children, many parents who do not report abusive childhood experiences become abusers and a sizable number of parents who were maltreated as children do not. The research designs of these investigations varied greatly and produced estimates of the rate of intergenerational transmission that ranged from 18% to 70%. The methodology and results of three studies are now detailed to illustrate how variations in basic research elements affected the estimated rates of intergenerational transmission obtained.

The first study was conducted by Hunter and Kilstrom<sup>18</sup> who interviewed 282 parents of newborns admitted to a regional intensive care nursery for premature and ill infants. Information concerning the parents' childhood, the mother's pregnancy, and the family's social networks was collected. In this study, abuse was defined to include incidents of neglect as well as overt abuse. Confirmed reports of abuse or neglect registered in the state central agency during the children's first year of life were used to determine current abuse status. At

the time of the initial interview, 49 parents reported a childhood history of abuse or neglect. At the one-year follow-up, ten babies were reportedly maltreated. Nine of them had parents with a history of abuse or neglect; however, 40 parents with comparable childhood histories were not identified as maltreaters. The rate of intergenerational transmission reported in this investigation was 18%, since only nine of the 49 parents who reported a history of abuse were identified as maltreaters.

This study pointedly illustrates how variations in the choice of subjects (identified abusers vs high-risk sample) and experimental design (retrospective vs prospective) affect the outcome of research findings. If this study had been conducted retrospectively with only the parents who were identified as maltreaters, the link between a history of abuse and subsequent child abuse would have appeared deceptively strong, since nine out of ten of the abusive parents reported a history of maltreatment (90%). By employing a prospective research design, Hunter and Kilstrom were able to identify 40 parents who broke the cycle of abuse (82%).

Parents who did not repeat the cycle of abuse differed from those parents who did in the following ways: they had more extensive social supports, they had fewer ambivalent feelings about the pregnancy, their babies were physically healthier, and they were more openly angry about their earlier abuse and better able to give detailed accounts of those experiences. They were also more likely to have been abused by only one of their parents as children, and were more apt to report a supportive relationship with one of their parents when growing up.

The generalizability of Hunter and Kilstrom's study is restricted, however, because of the nonrepresentative nature of their sample (parents of ill infants), the limitations associated with the data source used to detect current incidents of abuse (agency records), and the fact that the follow-up did

not extend beyond one year. Despite these qualifications, this study clearly demonstrates the superiority of prospective research designs and highlights the need to interpret retrospective studies with caution.

The second study was conducted by Egeland and Jacobvitz,<sup>9</sup> who used a semi-structured interview to collect information about the childhood histories and current disciplinary practices of 160 high-risk, low-income, predominantly single-parent mothers. In addition, measures of stress, isolation, and child characteristics were also obtained. In this study, a history of abuse was restricted to incidents of severe physical punishment including being thrown against a wall, hit repeatedly with an object, or intentionally burned. Current abusers were subdivided into three categories: a "physical abuse" group who used severe physical punishment tactics, a "borderline abuse" group who administered daily or weekly spankings that did not cause bruises or caused red marks that disappeared, and an "other" group which included women whose children were being cared for by someone else (reasons for the out-of-home care were not specified). The authors reported an intergenerational transmission rate of 70% for mothers with a history of severe physical abuse. This percentage, however, included mothers who physically abused their children (34%), mothers who fell into the borderline abuse category (30%), and mothers whose children were being reared away from the home (6%).

The high-risk nature of Egeland and Jacobvitz's sample confounds the results of this study. The influence of a history of abuse upon subsequent parenting cannot be separated from the effects of poverty, stress, and social isolation. In interpreting the findings it is important to keep in mind the simultaneous effects of these different variables. The results of this study are more appropriately interpreted as the result of multiple determinants on the etiology of abuse (*e.g.*, history of abuse, poverty, stress, iso-

lation), rather than the effect of a single determinant (*e.g.*, history of abuse).

The definition of "current abuse" used also affected the rate of intergenerational transmission obtained. In general, the broader the definitional criteria employed, the greater the apparent link between a history of abuse and current abuse. As noted, Egeland and Jacobvitz included the borderline abuse category in their computation of the rate of intergenerational transmission. They found that 30% of the mothers who reported a history of abuse fell into this category, but an even larger percentage of mothers who reported emotionally supportive childhoods were categorized as borderline abusers (39%). Given the failure of the borderline abuse category to differentiate these two groups, the validity of this category, and the conclusion that aberrant childhood histories "caused" the borderline parenting is questionable. Since a national survey of disciplinary practices reported that 97% of all children in the United States have been physically punished,<sup>36</sup> it appears the borderline abuse group's parenting is more reflective of a cultural norm than a parenting deviation. While on a continuum of parenting, the types of behavior associated with the borderline abuse group are not optimal, they can be understood in light of cultural (*e.g.*, acceptance of corporal punishment as a legitimate means of discipline) and environmental (*e.g.*, stress, isolation) determinants and not developmental (*e.g.*, history of abuse) factors.

Egeland and Jacobvitz also reported a number of mediating factors that affected the likelihood of transmission occurring with the women in their study. They found that nonrepeaters were more likely than repeaters to have one parent or foster parent who provided support and love while growing up, to be involved in a relationship with an emotionally supportive spouse or boyfriend, and to report fewer current stressful life events. They also showed a greater awareness of their history of being abused,

and were consciously resolved not to repeat the pattern of abuse with their own children. These characteristics are highly similar to those reported by Hunter and Kilstrom.<sup>18</sup>

Although, for these reasons, the 70% transmission rate reported by Egeland and Jacobvitz is likely to be an overestimation, their study provides a valuable contribution to understanding the interrelationships among the many determinants of abuse. Since the effects of a history of abuse upon subsequent parenting often cannot be separated from the effects of poverty, stress, and social isolation, this study highlights the importance of assessing multiple factors and giving careful thought to the choice of comparison groups used in investigations of this kind.

The last self-report study reviewed was conducted by Straus,<sup>35</sup> who interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,146 two-parent families with a child between the ages of 3 and 17. Straus obtained an 18% rate of transmission. There are two reasons why this figure is probably an underestimation. First, the definition of a history of abuse used in this study included only experiences of physical punishment or abuse that occurred during adolescence. Since this is an age when physical punishment is least likely to occur,<sup>37</sup> numerous individuals who were mistreated when they were younger, but not as teenagers, were probably omitted from the history of abuse category. Secondly, single parents and parents of children in the 0-2 age range were excluded from this study. This is problematic, since these two groups are at greater risk for abuse than two-parent families with older children. Despite these concerns, this study demonstrates that the link between being maltreated and becoming abusive is far from inevitable.

#### SUMMARY

The findings of the different investigations reviewed are not easily integrated be-

cause of their methodological variations. Nonetheless, the best estimate of the rate of intergenerational transmission appears to be  $30\% \pm 5\%$ . This suggests that approximately one-third of all individuals who were physically abused, sexually abused, or extremely neglected will subject their offspring to one of these forms of maltreatment, while the remaining two-thirds will provide adequate care for their children.

This figure was derived as follows. For the reasons discussed previously, we believe the estimates obtained by Hunter and Kilstrom<sup>18</sup> and Straus<sup>35</sup> are somewhat low. Despite questions about the validity of the borderline abuse category used by Egeland and Jacobvitz,<sup>9</sup> we relied heavily on their finding that only 34% of the severely abused mothers in their study physically abused their children. Since they employed a high-risk sample, it is reasonable to assume that the intergenerational hypothesis will be confirmed in less than one-third of all cases when more representative populations are sampled.

The rate of abuse among individuals with a history of abuse ( $30 \pm 5\%$ ) is approximately six times higher than the base rate for abuse in the general population (5%).<sup>26</sup> Although this suggests that being maltreated as a child is an important risk factor in the etiology of abuse, the majority of maltreated children do not become abusive parents. As discussed elsewhere,<sup>20</sup> many mediating factors affect the likelihood of transmission; consequently, unqualified acceptance of the intergenerational hypothesis is simply unwarranted.

#### CONCLUSION

Although there is some truth to the notion that abuse is cyclical, there are also many factors that diminish the likelihood of abuse being transmitted across generations. Being maltreated as a child puts one at risk for becoming abusive but the path between these two points is far from direct or inevitable.

In the past, unqualified acceptance of the intergenerational hypothesis has had many negative consequences. Adults who were maltreated have been told so many times that they will abuse their children that for some it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many who have broken the cycle are left feeling like walking time bombs. In addition, persistent acceptance of this belief has impeded progress in understanding the etiology of abuse and led to misguided judicial and social policy interventions. The time has come for the intergenerational myth to be put aside and for researchers to cease asking, "Do abused children become abusive parents?" and ask, instead, "Under what conditions is the transmission of abuse most likely to occur?"

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