



PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN FAMILIES WITH INTERPARENTAL VIOLENCE

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Abstract

The present study attempted to explore the relationships between the parents and their children in the context of families with interparental violence (violence perpetrated towards mothers). The exploration was grounded on the family systems and attachment theories. Through qualitative method, the researcher has tried to understand the subjective experiences of adolescents living in families with violence. Narratives of adolescents traces the various forms in which they had been exposed to interparental violence. The study was conducted among school going adolescents in Kasaragod district of Kerala, India. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 adolescents, who reported of living with interparental violence since their childhood. The study reveals adolescents growing up with continuous exposure to various forms of physical abuse and its aftermath, involvement of adolescents during violence, co-occurrence of abuse, has to a large extent affected the quality of relationships with their parents and resulted in insecure parent-child attachments.

Key words: *Interparental Violence, Adolescent exposure to interparental violence, abuse, parent-child relationship.*



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Introduction

"I didn't need to be in a secret fraternity to have secrets. I had real secrets of my own, rooted in Daddy's alcoholism and abuse. They got worse when I was fourteen and in the ninth grade and my brother [Roger] was only four. One night Daddy closed the door to his bedroom, started screaming at Mother, then began to hit her.

I came to accept the secrets of our house as normal. . . I never talked to anyone about them. .. Our family policy was "don't ask, don't tell."

The above paragraph is taken from "My Life", an Autobiography by former American President Bill Clinton (42nd President of the United States from 1993 to 2001), who in spite of being exposed to domestic violence in his growing years, went on to become a very charismatic and popular president.

Not all children growing up in violent families are lucky to traverse the path taken by Former President Bill Clinton. If we look around in our own families, friends circle, neighbourhood, we see a good number of children growing up in these circumstances. As mentioned in the paragraph, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell", is a slogan everyone follows. Very rarely do we find people, young or adult open up their experiences of abuse and neglect. These hurdles in life of growing up children do leave a deep wound, it does cause damages, and it has a great impact on parent-child



relationships.

In the specific religious- cultural context of India, dominated by deep rooted patriarchal systems, it is very difficult to erase the social menace of domestic violence. Children growing up in families with violence are bound to accept it as a way of life, a secret to carry in their life ahead. Though United Nations and our country as a signatory to Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC), believes in every child's right to safe childhood and family environment, in reality this does not materialize for all the children.

The present study attempted to explore the relationships between the parents and their children in the context of families with interparental violence (violence perpetrated towards mothers).

Interparental Violence and children:

“Domestic violence or intimate partner violence is a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviours including physical, sexual and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion used by adults or adolescents against their current or former intimate partners.” (UNICEF, 2006). The most common type of domestic violence is “interparental violence”, which refers to violence occurring between parents (Van der Veen and Bogaerts 2010). The studies conducted in Kerala and other parts of the World have proven that the exposure to interparental violence has a major impact on the functioning of children and families (Anitha A. & MVJ. 2016, Holt et al. 2008).

According to the report on the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) by IIPS & Macro International (2007), among women aged 15–49 years, 34% have experienced physical violence, and 9% have experienced sexual violence. In all, 35% of women in India have experienced physical or sexual violence, including 40% of married women. The report further says that for most women who have ever experienced spousal violence, the violence first took place within the first two years of their marriage. Hence it can be presumed that the violence among married couple, starts between two to four years of marriage and continues.

According to the report released by UNICEF in 2006, the children who live with and are aware of violence in the home face many challenges and risks that can last throughout their lives. There is a significant risk of ever-increasing harm to the child's physical, emotional and social development. A strong likelihood is that this will become a continuing cycle of violence for the next generation. Children who grow up with violence within the home study early and effective lessons about the usage of violence in interpersonal relationships to dominate others and may also be encouraged in doing so (Lereya, 2013). Children who suffer rejection, neglect, harsh physical punishment and sexual abuse or witness violence at home or inside the community are at extra danger of engaging in aggressive and delinquent behaviour at later stages of their development inclusive of violent behaviour as adults (WHO, 2014). In families where mothers experienced Interparental Violence (IPV), children were more likely to have poorer physical health, poorer socio-emotional adjustment and lower academic achievement. Similarly, IPV was closely associated with poorer parent–child relationships.

Theoretical Framework:

The family systems and attachment theories formed the framework for studying the parent-child relationships in families with inter-parental violence. According to the family systems approach, families form a system of interacting elements. In a family consisting of two parents and an adolescent, the subsystems would be the mother and the adolescent, the father and the adolescent, and the mother and the father. In families with more than one child or with extended family members who are closely involved in the family, the family system becomes a more complex network



of subsystems consisting of 36 dyadic relationships (a relationship of two persons) as well as every possible combination of three or more persons (Arnett, 2004).

Attachment security is often considered the classic measure of mother-child relationship quality (Greenberg, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 1990). Work by Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) indicates that consistent patterns of high maternal responsiveness (i.e., proximity promoting behaviour, accessibility, warmth) translates into children forming an attachment bond based upon trust and a sense of safety. These children typically fall under the classification of secure attachment. In contrast, low maternal responsiveness (i.e., inconsistent patterns of proximity promoting behaviour, inaccessibility, coldness) is associated with children's formation of insecure attachment. The development of insecure attachment is particularly prominent in high conflict homes (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Greenberg et al., 1990; Sigleman & Rider, 2015) where children can experience fear and a lack of security from both environmental and familial relationships (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970).

Methodology:

Through qualitative method, the researcher has tried to study the lived experiences and implications of Interparental Violence on children living in families with violence. Narratives of adolescents traces the various forms in which they had been exposed to interparental violence and how it has affected them. The study was conducted among school going adolescents in Kasaragod district of Kerala, India. In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 adolescents (15 girls and 10 boys), who reported of living with interparental violence since their childhood. The students were selected using purposive sampling through the school counsellors in the schools identified as located in the communities where there was a high prevalence of domestic violence.

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of in-depth interviews revealed the various forms in which children were exposed to interparental violence, their experiencing, witnessing and observing the violence between parents and how it has affected the relationship with their parents.

Exposure to various forms of abuse (feeling of fear & insecurity): All the children interviewed, spoke of experiencing the violent episodes between their parents directly. They shared a range of exposure to domestic violence including verbal/psychological, physical, social and economic abuse. The majority of respondents were from low socio-economic backgrounds and lived-in houses, which they described as “small”, most often with a veranda, two rooms and a kitchen space. The small physical spaces increased their vulnerability, and they couldn't escape being the direct witnesses to their parent's violence.

“I stay with my parents and two elder sisters in a small house with two rooms and a kitchen. My father is an alcoholic and he has been abusing and beating my mother, ever since I remember.” (a female adolescent).

All the children interviewed had been a direct witness to their parent's regular fights. For majority, it is daily occurrence in their lives.

“I have always been near or indirectly hearing shouts and abusive words. My father used to destroy phones, photos and has even hurt mother with a knife once.” (Girl)

Each child's experience on domestic violence is different and they are able to talk about it. During the entire process of data collection, there were few instances (3 out of 25), when participants also reported their mothers starting, or participating in, arguments, involving in physical abuse.



A boy told, *“I’m afraid of my mother, who always scolds me.”* says Shiva.... *“My mother is the problem creator....when the abuse is too much, father leaves the home for some time.....sleeps in his parent’s house and comes next day.”* (Boy)

Feeling responsible & getting hurt: Being in their adolescent age, all of them understood what it is like to be verbally, physically and psychologically abused. So every time there was a violent episode between the parents, majority of the respondents got in between, trying to protect, often their mother and younger siblings. They often put themselves at risk in trying to do so and there are instances when they got badly beaten up or hurt.

“....among my two elder sisters, 17 year old sister (who completed her plus two) is very bold and she is the only one who tells father to stop harming our mother.”

“I and my younger brothers do get in between the fights of our parentstrying to stop, pulling each of the parents apart, crying and shouting at them to stop,and often we end up hurting ourselves.....it feels so bad..”(says Girl).

Range of Abusive Tactics by father: The adolescents talked about a range of abusive tactics employed by their fathers, including making derogatory remarks, undermining a child’s capabilities, exaggerating children’s faults, being threatening, making unfair comparisons, neglecting or rejecting a child’s needs, and slapping or severe punishments for disciplining purposes. They also talked about their fathers not trusting them and starting to beat them in front of others which, according to them, were most grave in nature as it affected their sense of self-respect and image to others: *‘...If somebody complained about me, he never asked me whether it was actually my fault or not but start slapping, and beating me even in front of my friends, it was so embarrassing that you can never understand’.* (Boy)

A different perspective- Father as Nurturer: Though majority of respondents have described their father as aggressor, as reflected in a few qualitative studies (C.Øverlien 2014), during this study too a few respondents narrated their father as a nurturer. Narratives of the participants clearly showed the impact of their experiences on father-child relationships. Though greater number of adolescents feared the presence of their father, there were others who nurtured mixed feelings and a few of them said “how much they loved and missed their father when he was not around”.

Except for a few like Lakshmi, for whom the term “father” is a synonym of fear, majority of the children, in spite of being direct witness to their father’s abusing their mother, nurtured a liking for their father.

Emotional distress and depressive symptoms: All 25 young adults shared their experiences of inexorable emotional distress that comes usually under the symptoms related to anxiety, stress, and depression, including suicidal ideation. They talked openly and in detail about their grief, sadness, feeling scared and insecure, having fearful thoughts about what was going to happen and a desire to run away or die. Some shared that they had a wish to correct everything with some magic or imagining/daydreaming that they had intervened and stopped their fathers from behaving badly towards their mothers.

“Whenever they had a fight, I used to get very scared that something bad is going to happen with us and now my mum would leave or my dad would divorce her, what would happen to us, I had thoughts like these...words can never describe the feelings of my shaking heart at that time”. (Boy 4)

Mixed feelings of love and hatred towards parents: The burden and range of emotions and conflicted loyalties the adolescents had experienced since their childhood were evident from more than half of the interviewees. Most of the adolescents, for example, talked about experiencing both feelings of hatred and love at the same time. A minority of girls (3 out of 12) shared that when they were young, they desired to kill their fathers for behaving so badly towards



their mothers, but they also related this to their feelings of guilt about experiencing such feelings for fathers.

“My father forced us, mother, myself and siblings to leave the house and locked the door..... I hated my father for doing this to us.” (Boy 2)

Emotional & Physical Deprivation: One of the areas that emerged strongly in the study is the kinds of deprivation that children felt and expressed, be it fulfilling basic needs like food, clothing or shelter or be it higher order needs like love, safety and belongingness, of feeling that parents were not around to monitor or look after and care for them.

“...mother compulsorily sends us to school, so that at least we can have lunch which is provided freely from there.....At home we have to wait for the mercy of our father, he buy stationaries on his will”(Girl 2)

The longing for father’s love and care is visible in the words of some of them.

“When my friends speak of their father lovingly, caring for them, buying them things they liked, I always wonder, if it is really possible....it’s beyond my imagination...”

Mother as source of strength and comfort: From the interviews it was evident that for all the respondents mother was the center point of their ‘world’. All their needs physical, emotional and economic needs were met by their mothers. For majority of respondents, their mothers were source of strength and solace. Even after the violent episodes in family, the mother would try to fulfill all their needs of preparing food and taking care of them.

Conclusion:

The study reveals adolescents growing up with continuous exposure to various forms of physical abuse and its aftermath, involvement of adolescents during violence, co-occurrence of abuse, has to a large extent affected the quality of relationships with their parents and resulted in insecure parent-child attachments. Emotions of fear (of either parent-father & mother) and insecurity reflected in the responses of the children. The range of abusive tactics employed by father and in a few cases by mother has led to deterioration in the relationships between them. The children also shared a range of mixed feelings towards their parents, including love, hatred, desire to kill and protect. Findings shows that the children in families with interparental violence are deprived of basic emotional needs of safety, security and belongingness. It emerged from the analysis that young adults were not silent observers but rather that they tried to make sense of the abusive home environment since their childhood and reflected on reasons they perceived caused and/or contributed to IPV. The findings clearly reveal that adolescents have insights into the relationships they share with their parents even under these violent circumstances and a few of them are striving hard to develop and nurture love and care towards both their parents.

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