

Testing a Dose-Response Model of Intergenerational Transmission of Family Violence

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Abstract : Background and purpose: Violence that occurs within families is a global social problem. Children who are victims or witness to family violence are at risk for many negative effects both proximally and distally. One of the most disconcerting long-term effects occurs when child victims become adult perpetrators: the intergenerational transmission of family violence (ITFV). Early identification of those children most at risk for ITFV is needed to inform interventions to prevent future family violence perpetration and victimization. Only about 25-30% of child family violence victims become perpetrators of adult family violence (either child abuse, partner abuse, or both). Prior research has primarily been conducted using dichotomous measures of exposure (yes; no) to predict ITFV, given the low incidence rate in community samples. It is often assumed that exposure to greater amounts of violence predicts greater risk of ITFV. However, no previous longitudinal study with a community sample has tested a dose-response model of exposure to physical child abuse and parental physical intimate partner violence (IPV) using count data of frequency and severity of violence to predict adult ITFV. The current study used advanced statistical methods to test if increased childhood exposure would predict greater risk of ITFV. Methods: The study utilized 3 panels of prospective data from a cohort of 15 year olds (N=338) from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods longitudinal study. The data were comprised of a stratified probability sample of seven ethnic/racial categories and three socio-economic status levels. Structural equation modeling was employed to test a hurdle regression model of dose-response to predict ITFV. A version of the Conflict Tactics Scale was used to measure physical violence victimization, witnessing parental IPV and young adult IPV perpetration and victimization. Results: Consistent with previous findings, past 12 months incidence rates severity and frequency of interpersonal violence were highly skewed. While rates of parental and young adult IPV were about 40%, an unusually high rate of physical child abuse (57%) was reported. The vast majority of a number of acts of violence, whether minor or severe, were in the 1-3 range in the past 12 months. Reported frequencies of more than 5 times in the past year were rare, with less than 10% of those reporting more than six acts of minor or severe physical violence. As expected, minor acts of violence were much more common than acts of severe violence. Overall, regression analyses were not significant for the dose-response model of ITFV. Conclusions and implications: The results of the dose-response model were not significant due to a lack of power in the final sample (N=338). Nonetheless, the value of the approach was confirmed for the future research given the bi-modal nature of the distributions which suggest that in the context of both child physical abuse and physical IPV, there are at least two classes when frequency of acts is considered. Taking frequency into account in predictive models may help to better understand the relationship of exposure to ITFV outcomes. Further testing using hurdle regression models is suggested.

Keywords : intergenerational transmission of family violence, physical child abuse, intimate partner violence, structural equation modeling

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