
Social Learning Theory And Intimate Partner Violence

Today one of the largest problems within the American household is the immense amount of intimate partner violence. Researchers have tried to pinpoint the cause of this and what drives partners to engage in this kind of activity. Perhaps one of the most researched and sought after causes lies within the social learning theory. Many experts have been led to believe that those who witness and endure violence within their young lives will eventually turn to it, themselves. This theory has been proven time and time again.

In regards to this paper, it is of the utmost importance to truly understand what the social learning theory is before assessing how it relates to intimate partner violence. Social learning theory is defined as, "in psychological theory, learning behaviour that is controlled by environmental influences rather than by innate or internal forces." These influences are most commonly those who regularly surround us. They can be good friends, family members or other prominent beings in our lives. Within intimate partner violence, the most prominent influence tends to be family members.

The social learning theory aims to explain the commonalities amongst friends and families. It is puzzling as to why some families produce four children who all become abusers within their families and others produce four children that believe violence is a terrible thing and never see or use it within their lifetime. It also may show us why women choose violent partners, yet others steer away from it. The social learning theory tries to give an explanation for learned behaviours that most individuals would not usually engage in. It aims at providing why children grow up and exhibit much different attributes than other children.

In one intriguing study, two researchers studied how children end up being the unintended victims of marital violence. In this particular study, Rosenbaum and O'Leary studied the effect of marital violence on children. Their primary focus was the immense amount of marital violence that occurs within the American household, today, and its drastic consequences on its young witnesses. This article assessed particular consequences such as viewing family violence as a norm. This, in turn, may cause female children to grow up and become involved with an abusive person, thus viewing it as okay. In addition, male children have a much higher chance to grow up and become the next generation of abusive husbands.

Whether children hear or actually witness this violence, they are exposed to a type of violence that is really not "normal." However, when it is occurring on a regular basis, these children gather it is the regularity within homes. They are taught that violence is an effective way to solve problems and will make things better. These children then grow up to be the next generation of abusers and victims. It simply embedded in their brains that this is a positive way to solve problems and control aggression.

Court cases provide real-life examples of the social learning theory being exhibited in violent cases. One example of many, involved a man named Richard Shaputis, who was convicted of second-degree murder in the death of his wife Erma in 1987. In 2006, he was granted a parole date. However, the Governor reversed this believing he was a direct threat to the public's safety. The Court of Appeal concluded that this fact could not be directly found and granted him

a trial and opportunity to fight it. Whilst what was happening in this conflict was of great concern, perhaps the information leading up to the murder and Mr. Shaputer's childhood is of greatest concern.

"Petitioner's father worked long hours and frequently was absent from the home, leaving petitioner to raise himself and his six younger siblings. Petitioner's probation report and 1997 life prisoner evaluation report (LPER) reflect that petitioner stated his father physically abused him" (In re RICHARD SHAPUTIS on Habeas Corpus, 2008). It can be gathered that Shaputis learned, through being abused in his childhood, that abuse was simply a norm. In turn, he ended up murdering his own wife and abusing his first wife. While this does not make his doings okay, it is still an example of the social learning theory at work. This is just one of many cases encompassing the sheer reality that abuse is learned within families.

There is, no doubt, a direct correlation between the social learning theory and marital violence. One very prominent study... "found that men and women who had witnessed parents who hit each other were three times more likely than those who had not to abuse their partners" (Mihalic, Elliot 1997). The more a child witnesses this, the more they fail to see the problem with marital violence. They view this in a positive light because their caregiver is showing them that it is okay. The more this violence occurs, the more its witnesses are exposed to violence shed in a positive light. They are being taught, time and time again, to view violence as positive, rather than a negative.

The idea of children witnessing abuse and becoming abusers, themselves, is not simply used within instances of abuse. When taking an in-depth look into abusers and the learnt behaviour they give to their witnesses, this idea within the social learning theory can also be used positively. Children who have parents that exhibit little anger towards each other will be more likely, then, to use this type of behaviour in their relationships. The social learning theory can be exhibited within positive instances, as well as negative ones. It is not a one-sided street, by any means. However, the issue lies within these negative effects. For the negative effects cause severe consequences.

A study conducted in 1992 aimed at showing a correlation between students who had witnessed parental violence and then exhibited it into their own relationships. It involved 847 undergraduate students from a mid-sized midwestern university. A questionnaire was admitted in a class that filled general requirements: to get a wide variety of respondents from different majors. Those participating were given the option to opt-out, however less than 1% chose to do that. The purpose of this study was primarily to "[measure] the prevalence and severity of physical force in dating relationships" (Tontodonato, Crew 1992).

This study concluded that while there is not a direct correlation between women witnessing violence, there was in the men who participated in the study. This, once again, is compliant within the social learning theory and proves once again the immense relevance within this argument, and take, on intimate partner violence and homicide. It may be of interest to examine the key, psychological differences between males and females. In many studies, men are much greater affected and conditioned by violence within their homes than women.

While women can still become abusers and be greatly affected by violence, men seem to more greatly suffer from the consequences. These may be, in part, because of evolution and the amount of aggression that men have. Men are more aggressive creatures and have been since

the beginning of time. They are much more apt to care about control and have always been the “head” of the house. Their need for power is justified when viewing their father hit their mother or even them. Women are, generally, more appalled by violence and less apt to use it because of their evolutionary features of calmness and their deep intuition to be a “mother-like” being towards all they encounter.

In some countries, the rate of female homicides that is the result of an intimate partner can be anywhere from forty to seventy per cent. Most of the time this murder can be directly correlated back to gender norms and the male’s need to feel power and authority over women. Evolutionary psychology directly pinpoints the very fact that men feel they need power over their families, whereas women feel the need to be obedient. This is a particular reason that so many women fall prey to their male partners.

Men who are strong believers in masculinity and feel a direct need to control women are much more likely to engage in homicide against their female partners. When women refuse sex, do not listen, or perpetrate any sort of activity that threatens their partner’s masculinity; they are putting themselves at risk of immense domestic violence and even death. This is because of men’s psychological intuition that they need power over their partners. The evolutionary theory and social learning theory can go hand in hand, as men who have taken their need for control too far, pass that onto their sons and daughters, and so on.

Social learning theory is at the heart of violence among intimate partners. “Social learning theory has been used to study the “intergenerational cycle of violence” that proposes that children who witness violence or who have been victims of violence themselves as children are at risk of becoming perpetrators of violence or victims of violence as adults” (Ali & Naylor, 2013). This is why the cycle is often seen within families for several generations. Many times, this cycle is simply never broken because of this factor. It is widely believed that children will partake in behaviours that have been taught to them by their parents. The cycle of violence will continue, many times, until law finally intervenes. For some families, the intervening may never actually occur, and the cycle of violence will be ongoing.

Another real-life example of the social learning theory takes place in the life of Richard Ramirez. Ramirez was an American serial killer who was eventually captured and convicted on thirteen counts of murder, five attempted murders, eleven sexual assaults, and fourteen burglaries. His crimes ruined the families of many, yet he showed little remorse. In understanding Ramirez’s motives it is very important to understand his background.

Ramirez grew up in Texas in a family of five children. His father was extremely abusive, and he would often sleep in a cemetery as to avoid him. From an extremely early age, Ramirez would also bond with his cousin who had served in the Vietnam War. He would show him photos of the victims he had killed and would tell him stories of the Vietnamese women he would rape. He even informed Ramirez how to kill others. Ramirez was taught how to kill and experienced abuse on a regular basis. He was taught that violence, murder, rape, and burglary were a normal part of everyday life.

His cousin would eventually murder his wife, and Ramirez moved in with his sister and her husband. Matters did not become better after this, though. Ramirez was greatly affected by his beloved cousin’s incarceration and his sister’s husband was a “peeping Tom” who would take Ramirez with him on his night’s out. So, even though he moved homes, Ramirez was still

subject to the norm within his family, that abusing women was okay. In addition, after four short years, Ramirez's cousin was released out of a mental hospital after being deemed mentally stable enough, and he, once again, influenced him.

While Ramirez's actions can not be justified by his childhood, there is an explanation for why he did the things that he did. Ramirez witnessed violence, endured violence and was exposed to murder and rape at a very young age. He never had any influences in his life that would discipline him. He was taught that women were to be "played with." He was taught that his ugly fantasies were okay, and he, in turn, acted on them. While Ramirez was on death row, he died from other complications at the age of 53. His story is one of the most gruesome examples of what the social learning theory can cause.

Many perpetrators, themselves, have factors within their own lives that simply were not rooting for them from the beginning. In fact, approximately one in four abusers in intimate partner violence was abused, themselves, during childhood. In addition, "Respondents with the experience of being both abused as a child and witnessing parental violence, the 'double whammy' had a one in three chance of encountering marital violence in the study year, double the overall rate for annual marital violence (16% for the sample)" (Mihalic, Elliot 1997). This causes severe psychological trauma to its victims and causes them to view violence as a norm within their own lives.

This is not to say abusers should not be condemned for their actions, or even sympathized with. However, it creates a doorway into the psychological influences this places on them. These influences can cause other psychological disorders that place their victims at a great risk of exhibiting abusive behaviours. Some abusers develop schizophrenia, multiple-personality disorder, depression, and other psychological disorders. These prevent them from thinking clearly.

One study concluded that, "23 to 40% of battered women witnessed violence between their parents, while 10 to 30% of battered women were abused as children" (Mihalic, Elliot 1997). Not only do the chances greatly increase of abusers watching abuse and becoming abusers, themselves, women who witness abuse are much more likely to view it as okay. In turn, these women view being "beat" as something that is simply a part of the relationship. They may never receive help, not because they do not want it, but because they do not see an issue with what is happening to them on a regular basis.

Some other widely studied explanations for intimate partner violence are the evolutionary theory and psychological mental disorders. The evolutionary theory is the idea that men have, evolutionarily, been aggressive and in control. In turn, women are supposed to listen to men and do what they are told. When they do not conform to evolutionary standards, they may be more apt to become the victims of abuse. This may also be an explanation for why women stay in abusive relationships, as they are taught to not disobey. Another psychological theory is that of those with mental disorders such as depression or schizophrenia. These people's pain and loss of reality may cause them to take it out on unintended victims.

In talking about intimate partner violence, it is very important to realize that social learning theory is not the only reason for it. Many individuals turn to violence as a sense of "control" or for other psychological reasons. In coming across abusers, we may be quick to assume that they, themselves, were abused or witnessed prominent abuse within their homes. While, the

odds of this being the case are much higher than those in “normal” homes, it is not necessarily the case.

It is also of the utmost importance to bring awareness to these issues. “On average, nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States. During one year, this equates to more than 10 million women and men” (NCADV The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2019). Many women find it very difficult to get out of abusive relationships because of cognitive dissonance and investments such as children, money, and possessions. Whatever the cause of this violence may be, it is our job to provide awareness to this issue and ensure women and men know that there is always a way out.

“1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men experience severe intimate partner physical violence, intimate partner contact sexual violence, and/or intimate partner stalking with impacts such as injury, fearfulness, post-traumatic stress disorder, use of victim services, contraction of sexually transmitted diseases, etc” (NCADV | National Coalition Against Domestic Violence', 2019). The majority of these victims will never see justice be served, either. The issue lies within the norms that take place in households just as much as it does in society, as well as the lack of proper rights for these victims.

The list of victims of spousal homicide, such as Nicole Brown Simpson and Amy Mullis, is, sadly enough, never ending. These women had warning signs up until their deaths, however the system could not save them. Women, and men alike, remain in constant fear because of their abusers. Abusers do not receive enough punishment and are left stalking, verbally and physically assaulting, and cause severe trauma to their victims, that many victims never get over. It is time for a change within our justice system to allow victims the necessary protection they deserve, so as to avoid any further victims.

Works Cited

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