Paternal Practices, Parental Occupation and Children's Aggression

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Violence is an epidemic in the United States and homicide rates are a good measure of violence. Homicide rates in the United States are higher than in the rest of the industrialized world. Homicide rates in the major European countries and Canada range from 1 to 4 per hundred thousand residents (United Nations, 1991); whereas, in the United States the homicide rate is 8.7 per hundred thousand residents (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1991). The media improperly portrays violence as exclusively an inner-city African-American problem; however, the white homicide rate alone is 6 per hundred thousand residents (calculated from 1990 Crime in the United States and The 1990 Census of the Population). Homicide is the most common cause of death for both young African-American males and females. Young African American males are 11 times more likely to die from homicide than are young non African-American males. (American Psychological Association, 1993).

Social Cognition

Violence is learned behavior. Huesmann (1988) and Bandura (1973) argue that children learn aggressive behavior through both observational learning and enactive learning. There is a positive relationship between a child's observation of others behaving aggressively and the child behaving aggressively. Eron (1987) also holds the view that severe antisocial aggression is primarily a learned behavior. Eron argues that instigation, the conditions that are likely to be frustrating to the child; reinforcement, a contingent response from the parent to the child's aggression; identification, the internalization of parental standards and modeling of the behavior of significant adults; and sociocultural norms are important determinants of what behaviors are acceptable and desirable. Eron (1987:440) posits that, "aggression and prosocial behavior represent opposite kinds of interpersonal problem-solving strategies that are learned early in life. If a child learns one mode well he or she does not tend to learn the other well."

Social behavior is controlled to a great extent by cognitive scripts that are stored in a person's memory and are used as guides for behavior and social problem solving. A script suggests what events are to happen in the environment, how the person should behave in response to these events, and what the likely outcome of those behaviors would be. People appraise situations and decide which scripts are appropriate for the situation. Antisocial behavior is largely determined by the cognitive scripts which are retrieved in response to frustrating situations (Berkowitz, 1988; Huesmann, 1988). It seems reasonable to infer that children learn cognitive schemas and scripts of interpersonal relations from parental behavior in parent-child interactions; parental behavior is also an important role model for children's future interactions.

Parenting Styles

Baumrind (1968) has categorized parenting into three styles: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Maccoby and Martin (1983) make further distinctions, identifying four styles: 1) the authoritative-reciprocal parent who is demanding and controlling as well as being accepting, responsive and child centered; 2) the authoritarian-power assertive parent exercises considerable control over the child and is demanding as well as rejecting, unresponsive, and parent-centered; 3) permissive-indulgent parents are highly involved in children's lives, but allow them a great deal of freedom and do not control their negative behaviors; and 4) permissive-indifferent parents are uninvolved in their children's lives

and interact with them as little as possible.

A large body of research relates authoritative parenting with children's academic achievement and prosocial behavior. Dornbusch, et al. (1987) found that authoritative parenting is positively correlated with adolescent school performance, whereas authoritarian and permissive parenting are negatively related. These findings relate to aggression because Eron (1987) has found that academic achievement and antisocial aggression tend to be at opposite ends on a continuum. High academic achievers tend to behave prosocially, whereas antisocially aggressive children tend to be low academic achievers.

Maccoby and Martin (1983) report that parents of aggressive children tend to be authoritarian but children of authoritarian parents may or may not be aggressive. Along the same lines, Eron, Walder, & Lefkowitz (1971) found a substantial correlation among third grade children between parental use of punishment at home and the aggressiveness of the child at school. Going even further, Elder (1974; Cited in McLoyd, 1990) posits that problems in children's peer relations may stem from the styles of interaction that children learn from their parents.

Looking at other protective factors, Boone (1991) has shown that among low income African-American male adolescents church attendance of both the adolescents and the mothers is the strongest discriminant variable in predicting adolescents' membership in nonaggressive, non-institutionalized aggressive, or aggressive groups. Mother's non-material expressions of love and consistent but moderate verbal and physical reprimands for deviant behavior were also related to the boys membership in the nonaggressive group.

Socio-Economic Status

Socio-economic status accounts for a large part of the variance in parenting practices. Bronfenbrenner's (1989) Ecological Systems Theory shows that differences in macrosystems (the general cultural milieu) affect microsystems (such as family, peers, school, and the community) as they influence the child's development. Bronfenbrenner explicitly predicts that macrosystem differences such as socioeconomic status and racial or ethnic group membership result in very different developmental outcomes. The concentration of poverty and diminished employment opportunities for under-class inner city residents exacerbate the despair and hopelessness which characterize the inner city (Wilson, 1987).

Skinner, et al. (1992) have linked economic hardship to adolescent aggression in a middle-class rural sample. Economic hardship influences children through its effect on the parents. Economic hardship and adaptations to hardship increase husband's but not wives hostility and negative behavior toward their spouses. Financial difficulty is related to irritable parenting and parent's irritable responses to discipline situations evoke expressions of aggression in their adolescent children.

McLoyd's (1990) literature review presents evidence that anxiety, depression, and irritability - states heightened by economic hardship - increase the tendency of parents to be punitive, erratic, unilateral, and generally nonsupportive of their children. Poor mothers value obedience more, are less likely to use reasoning, and more likely to use physical punishment as a means of disciplining and controlling the child. McLoyd also shows that in both black and non-black families poor parents who are supportive but firm and consistent disciplinarians are more likely to have children who function well socioemotionally and academically than those who are punitive, power assertive, and

erratic.

Kohn (1969) found that work related differences in values correspond to child rearing practices. Men in middle-class occupations, jobs that usually permit considerable self-direction, report weighing their child's intention when considering discipline. Middle-class parents favor psychological disciplinary techniques, such as withdrawal of love to shape their children's behavior. Working-class parents tend to favor physical discipline, punishing children as a consequence of their actions, deemphasizing intention.

Parental Occupation

Participative work is a fairly new concept in the American workplace (Lawler & Mohrman, 1987). Crouter (1984) posits that work under a participative approach to management is different from work under a traditional approach in at least 3 major domains: 1) the complexity of the work itself, the extent to which employees are encouraged to acquire all the skills needed to perform the variety of tasks handled by their work group; 2) the social context in which work is carried out, the extent to which work involves social interaction, conjoint problem-solving, and group decision-making; and 3) the autonomy or power of the individual, or of the workgroup. Kohn and Schooler (1973) also found that parents who work in occupations which involve close supervision, have low substantive complexity, and routinized flow of work are lower in intellectual flexibility and hold values of conformity to authority for their children. Conversely, occupational conditions conducive to the exercise of self-direction in one's work are empirically tied to intellectual flexibility and parent's valuing self-direction for both themselves and their children.

Middle-class workers have always had the opportunity to take initiative, and use thought and independent judgment in their work. These are job characteristics which seem to facilitate adult development (Crouter, 1984). Kohn and Schooler (1973) have shown that unskilled employment in large bureaucratic organizations does not allow workers to use initiative, thought and independent judgement in one's work ,, to direct one's own occupational activities. The research by Kohn and others suggests that participative work may facilitate the development of authoritative parenting styles. The adult occupational development of under-class, lower-class, and working-class adults, and especially of African-Americans may have been impaired because they typically work in unskilled jobs.

Maternal Employment

In a study of African-Americans it is extremely important to evaluate the effects of maternal employment because, as The Center for the Study of Social Policy (1986; cited in McLoyd, 1990) shows, 45 percent of African-American children live in female-headed households and 70 percent of those children are poor. Among lower-class families maternal income makes an important contribution to the family's economic well being. Poor mothers and black mothers are likely to work because of necessity and are more likely to use an authoritarian parenting style (McLoyd, 1990). However, I argue that poor mothers who work in participative settings should be more likely to use an authoritative style of parenting which is conducive to children's socioemotional functioning and academic achievement. Parents who have complex jobs could be expected to value self-direction for their children and to hold sophisticated and complex prosocial skills and conflict resolution scripts which they could teach to their children; consequently, the children would be more likely to use prosocial scripts.

Current Research

Many researchers have examined the internal relations between occupation and adult development, occupation and parenting style, and parenting style and children's behavior. The relation between occupation and level of children's antisocial aggression, however, has not been examined. I am currently conducting a study which examines the hypotheses that in addition to the effect of low income, 1) parents who are either unemployed or have jobs which are routine, low in substantive complexity, closely supervised, and do not require substantive social skills are less likely to use an authoritative-reciprocal style of parenting and 2) their children exhibit higher levels of antisocial aggression and have lower levels of academic achievement than do children whose parents work in occupations which allow self-direction.

A face-to-face survey of the occupations, socio-economic status and parenting styles of elementary school children's parent's is currently being conducted. Measures of children's antisocial aggression and academic performance will be obtained from the Public Schools. Data obtained from the parental survey will be correlated with children's data obtained from the schools.

The survey will provide specific data on the parental practices and occupations of low income Black and White parents. We are asking questions concerning the family's total income. Parent's unemployment histories and histories of welfare experience are also being obtained. Questions about the relation between aggression and the structure of the family are being asked. Parents are being questioned on their religious participation. Parents' involvement in community affairs may be a domain of adult development where they would likely learn communication, organization, and negotiating skills which would affect their parenting styles; therefore, parents are being questioned about their volunteer activities. A short adult intelligence test is being administered. Parents' attitudes on violence, beliefs in the appropriateness in the use of violence, and parents' own conflict resolution scripts are being examined. Parents are being questioned on the messages which they give to their children concerning violence: do they recommend negotiation, avoidance, or direct aggression in resolving conflicts. Teachers, assistant teachers, and school bus drivers will complete a 10 item Teacher's Prediction of Peer-nominated Aggression scale for each student. Children's standardized Categorical Achievement Test scores will also be obtained. Results from this study should provide valuable information on the relations of Black and White youths' aggressive behavior and academic performance with previously unexamined structural factors and parental practices.

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