

Silenced Mothers: Exploring Definitions of Adolescent-to-Parent Violence and Implications for Practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights inconsistencies in how child/adolescent-to-parent violence (CPV) is defined. Definitions of CPV range from descriptions based on instances of physical assault to broad perceptions of violence, which include coercive control behaviours. Too much focus on physical violence has limited a broader exploration about the dynamics of CPV, which has disguised the gendered nature of this phenomenon. This literature review incorporates peer-reviewed quantitative studies, qualitative research with mothers, surveys of adolescents, youth justice court/law reviews, family therapy case studies and reviews of both “child-to-parent violence” and “adolescent-to-parent violence.” Key research in this area has overlooked the complex interplay between context, power and control dynamics that are clearly evident in the CPV experience. Reviewing the literature has uncovered how gender is rendered invisible and how research needs to move towards language such as: child/adolescent-to-mother violence or child/adolescent-to-mother abuse.

Keywords:

Adolescent-to-parent violence; Child-to-parent Violence; Domestic violence; Family violence

INTRODUCTION

Family violence is a social problem with long-ranging impacts on society and has been the focus of research for decades. In 2014, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that violence towards women and children has serious lifelong health and social consequences (WHO, 2014). However, one aspect of family violence about which there is a dearth of research in academic literature is child/adolescent-to-parent violence (CPV). Research into CPV suggests this type of violence is closely linked with using violence in future, intimate-partner relationships; therefore, it is crucial that academic research further explores this phenomenon (Lee, Reese-Webber, & Kahn, 2014). As early as 1979, Harbin and Madden discussed the phenomenon of CPV, describing it as “a new syndrome of family violence – parent battering” (1979, p. 1288). Prior to Harbin and Madden’s work, children’s and adolescents’ violence towards parents was not considered an aspect of family violence and was not formally studied in any depth. Simmons, McEwan, Purcell, and Ogloff (2018) state that, over the last three decades, the CPV academic literature and research have grown slowly; thus, a number of questions and gaps in methodology, theory and context still remain.

Authors continue to debate how to accurately define CPV and how to wrestle with the gendered nature of such violence. For example, Hunter, Nixon, and Parr (2010) highlights that mothers are the primary target of violence and how violence towards mothers is connected to young people witnessing domestic violence (DV). However, mothers’ voices are largely silent in the academic literature; this has implications for how CPV is perceived and appears to parallel how mothers are not supported by social services (Holt & Retford, 2013). This paper’s overall purpose is to explore how definitions of CPV have evolved over time and how gender-neutral concepts within the literature may silence victims and create barriers to help seeking. Furthermore, this critical review will propose a new lens through which to view CPV, moving towards a “child/adolescent-to-mother abuse” definition where the primary victim’s experience informs how this facet of family violence is perceived and explained.

METHODOLOGY

Due to the lack of research in this area, the inclusion criteria for this literature review are broad. First of all, research into how people define violence and domestic violence was used to add more context to existing debates within CPV literature. Even though there is a lack of research in CPV, a vast majority of research points to mothers/women being the primary targets of violence (Downey, 1997; Lyons, Bell, Frechette, & Romano, 2015; Robinson, Davidson, & Drebot, 2004; Ulman & Straus, 2003). Therefore, this critical review will focus primarily on mother’s/women’s experiences and not violence towards fathers. The review incorporates peer-reviewed quantitative studies, qualitative research with mothers, surveys of adolescents, youth justice court/law reviews, family therapy case studies and literature reviews on both “child-to-parent violence” and “adolescent-to-parent violence.” Moreover, reports on CPV by the Australian Government and reports on the impact of violence by the WHO and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) were also included in this review. This paper explores definitions of CPV; therefore, literature focused on intervention programs, and the efficacy of those programs, were excluded from this review.

Due to the lack of research into CPV, the date range for literature in this review ranges from initial research in 1979 to current research. Incorporating research across the history of CPV literature is necessary to give the reader a holistic picture of the CPV academic landscape. Databases used for this review includes: PubMed, SCOPUS, PsycINFO and The Cochrane Library. Also, this review includes reports on violence found in the publications section of the WHO's website. Keywords included: *child-to-parent violence, CPV, adolescent-to-parent abuse, child-to-mother abuse, violence, definitions of violence adolescent violence, CPV and mothers, domestic violence and child-to-parent violence, domestic violence and adolescent-to-mother abuse, battered parents, and battered mothers.*

DEBATES SURROUNDING DEFINITIONS

Firstly, this paper will use the term *child/adolescent-to-parent violence (CPV)* for the bulk of the paper in order to reflect the current terminology used in the literature. However, there will be a discussion later in the review as to why it is necessary to use *child/adolescent-to-mother abuse* terminology. This review's move from CPV terminology to mother abuse terminology mirrors the ongoing debate within family violence literature on how to accurately define CPV. Pagani (2015) wrote that narrow definitions of violence are easier for researchers to measure; however, broad definitions can describe the overall impact of violence on the victim. In the case of CPV literature, narrow definitions of violence are based on physical assault statistics gleaned from police and court reports, which are easier to measure; therefore, it is the preferred manner to study CPV rates (Agnew & Huguley, 1989; Contreras & Cano, 2016; Peek, Fisher, & Kidwell, 1985). These statistics rely on *specific incidents* of physical violence, as opposed to *patterns of behaviour*.

Similar to Pagani's argument, Downey (1997) contended that narrow definitions are not adequate as they minimise the complexity of CPV. Holt (2013) documented the changing definition of CPV in how the term itself has changed over time from "parent battering," to child-to-parent violence and finally to adolescent-to-parent abuse. The term *abuse* reflects the pattern of violent behaviour an adolescent uses within the home to create an environment of power and control, which is not accurately reflected in definitions based on single-incident violent behaviour (Simmons et al., 2018). This evolution in terminology illustrates how initial narrow definitions focused on "battering" have evolved to include patterns of violence and control, as well as other forms of abuse. The current debate on how to measure child/adolescent-to-parent abuse highlights the conflict between measuring specific incidents of violent behaviour versus reflecting the dynamic within the family and the impact on mothers specifically (Edenborough, Jackson, Mannix, & Wilkes, 2008).

Initially, violence towards parents was compared to domestic violence and defined as physical abuse, verbal abuse and non-verbal threats of physical abuse towards a parent (Harbin & Madden, 1979). Even though Harbin and Madden's definition of CPV extends outside the bounds of physically violent acts, it places physical aggression at its core. While a number of studies on CPV focus on instances of physical abuse, verbal abuse and threats of physical violence with a weapon; they place greater emphasis on instances of physical assaults of parents (Kratcoski, 1985; Margolin & Baucom, 2014). Other studies move away from including verbal abuse and threats and define CPV as entirely comprised of instances

of physical violence toward a parent (Boxer, Gullan, & Mahoney, 2009; Peek et al., 1985; Walsh & Krienert, 2007). Studies that consist of juvenile justice or clinical samples tend to rely on definitions of CPV which depend on reported instances of punching, kicking, shoving or injuring a parent with a weapon (Gebo, 2007; Kethineni, 2004; Peek et al., 1985). Even though these studies include violent episodes, they overlook more complex patterns of abuse and control within the family.

Feminist researchers mark a change in the literature and move from the term CPV to adolescent-to-parent abuse, or child/adolescent-to-mother abuse to accurately reflect the complexity and pattern of violence within these adolescent/mother dyads (Downey, 1997; Holt, 2011; Sheehan, 1997; Wilcox, 2012). Generally, they argue these narrow definitions of CPV are inadequate and not representative of the complexity of adolescent-to-mother abuse contexts (Calvete et al., 2014; Downey, 1997; Edenborough et al., 2008; Hunter, Nixon and Parr 2010; Sheehan, 1997; Simmons et al., 2018). Holt synthesizes this school of research into a definition of child/adolescent-to-parent abuse as "...a pattern of behaviour that uses verbal, financial, physical or emotional means to practice power and exert control over a parent" (Holt, 2013, p. 2). This definition reflects the complexity of child/adolescent-to-parent abuse within the family and highlights dynamics of power and control. Moreover, definitions of child/adolescent-to-parent abuse shift the focus from the young person's behaviour to the impact on the victim and the victim's experience (Downey, 1997). The shift from defining CPV based on specific incidents of physically aggressive behaviour to acts of violence within a larger pattern of power and control places more emphasis on context and highlights the victim's experience. Ultimately, broad definitions based on power and control may be more difficult to measure; however, they more accurately encapsulate the behaviour and its impact on the family. Therefore, the movement from CPV to child/adolescent-to-mother abuse is more reflective of the phenomenon and how it manifests itself in families.

NATURE OF ADOLESCENT-TO-PARENT ABUSE

The gendered side of CPV was identified early in the academic literature and has been reinforced in subsequent work. Initially, Harbin and Madden studied married couples with adolescents using violence and identified that mothers were the primary targets of aggressive behaviour by sons (1983b). In the decades following this groundbreaking study, research into CPV consistently reports that children and adolescents target their mothers more than other family members (Downey, 1997; Lyons et al., 2015; Robinson et al, 2004; Ulman & Straus, 2003). However, Peek, Fischer and Kidwell's (1985) study of over 1,500 male secondary school students found that fathers were slightly more targeted than mothers. Simmons et al. (2018) also cites Peek, Fischer, and Kidwell's work as evidence that there is gender parity among CPV targets. This study consisted of a survey which was given to each participant in his sophomore, junior and senior year of education. One of the study's limitations is that the authors defined violence as strictly acts of physical violence towards parents. This narrow definition does not take into account the broad range of violence used to exert control over the relationship, which may account for lower numbers of maternal victims. Moreover, rates of violence towards fathers, within a domestic violence context, is compromised in light of research into how children and adolescents intervene in domestic violence

incidents to protect their mothers and siblings, as opposed to using violence for personal gain (Buckley et al., 2007; Tuyen & Larsen, 2012). In addition, Holt (2013) found that, once coercive control and patterns of violence are taken into account, rates of violence towards mothers are consistently higher than violence towards fathers. Therefore, the gendered nature of CPV reveals itself when definitions include characteristics of coercive control such as: verbal abuse, intimidation, psychological abuse, physical abuse, financial abuse and emotional abuse. Moreover, research into rates of children and adolescents intervening in domestic violence incidents to protect mothers and siblings, calls rates of violence towards fathers into question (Tuyen & Larsen, 2012).

There appears to be a disconnect between research which documents that mothers are more targeted by children's and young people's violence, and how this violence is discussed in the literature. Even though a preponderance of the research clearly states that mothers are the primary victims of adolescent abuse within the home, the phrase used for the violence is "child/adolescent-to-parent violence" and not "child-to-mother abuse." In this sense, the mother's experience is silenced and the gendered component of the violence is disregarded in favour of the gender-neutral term *parents*. Wilcox (2012) points out this discrepancy in her work comparing the impacts of domestic violence on women and the impacts of adolescent abuse on mothers. She states that CPV is primarily violence used against mothers to control aspects of that relationship. Furthermore, Sheehan's (1997) main critique of CPV literature is that most authors neglect power, control and gender dynamics. Therefore, use of the term CPV does not accurately reflect how women are the main victims of abuse, continues to marginalise their experience and keeps the gendered nature of this violence invisible.

THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN POWER AND CONTROL DYNAMICS AND PERMISSIVE PARENTING LITERATURE ON CPV

One key aspect of CPV is that it reverses traditional power roles within the family, which establishes the adolescent as the figure in control. In these cases, children and adolescents gain power within the family and parents may not be able to re-establish control (Calvete et al., 2014). An Australian based study interviewed mothers who experienced CPV and found that children and adolescents use violence to assume power within the relationship, undermining the mother's authority as a parent (Stewart, Wilkes, Jackson, & Mannix, 2014). Even though it is well established that violence is a tool that adolescents use to establish power in the parent/child dyad, studies differ in explanations over what maintains this dynamic.

One popular discourse is that parenting styles are the primary maintaining factor for CPV (Harbin & Maddin, 1983a; Hong, Kral, Espelage, & Allen-Meares, 2012; Robinson, Davidson, & Drebot, 2004). Studies point to permissive parenting styles as possible factors maintaining CPV (Boxer et al., 2009; Breznia, 1999; Lyons et al., 2015; Margolin & Baucom, 2014; Ulman & Straus, 2003). Permissive parenting is described as parents who are not able to adhere to boundaries in order to avoid violent incidents. In essence, it is argued that adolescents use violence to get what they want and parents accede to their demands to avoid more severe violent outbursts (Hong et al., 2012). Harbin and Madden (1979) characterised permissive parenting as parents rewarding violent behaviour by giving into their children's demands.

The theory of permissive parenting as the maintaining factor for violence towards parents has continued to thrive in CPV research for the last forty years with recent criticisms from feminist authors (Downey, 1997; Edenborough et al., 2008; Holt, 2013). Other research goes further and defines permissive parenting as “lax” parenting, where parents lack the responsibility to adequately discipline children/adolescents for violent behaviour (Robinson et al., 2004). The link between CPV and lax or permissive parenting is both overly simplistic and potentially harmful. Research has clearly positioned mothers as the primary target of violence; therefore, statements regarding “lax parents” covertly target mothers as the lax parent. Such a link may reinforce messages of mother-blaming within the larger society.

There are a number of limitations to permissive parenting/lax parenting as causal factors for CPV. Firstly, linking CPV to lax/permissive parenting discounts the complexity of gendered violence and coercive control, and devalues the mother’s experience (Downey, 1997). Comparable to how describing violence as directed towards “parents” devalues the research stating that mothers are the primary victims; “permissive parenting” can be seen as blaming mothers’ parenting decisions for the violence. Ulman and Straus (2003) describe how mothers view permissive parenting as blaming their parenting for the violence, which can reinforce feelings of guilt and shame.

From a gendered perspective, the permissive parenting explanation for CPV does not value the mothers’ experience and may lead to entrenched maternal guilt. Added feelings of guilt and shame greatly reduce mothers’ help-seeking behaviour which can lead to mothers contacting police for support as a last resort rather than proactively seeking support before a crisis occurs (Holt, 2011). For social workers on the front line of service delivery, challenging the discourses that overwhelmingly ignore and silence maternal victims of this violence is of critical importance to ensure that barriers to proactive help-seeking can be overcome and effective interventions maximized. Holt (2011) engaged a unique method to explore this issue with this difficult-to-reach population. She systematically studied mothers’ posts on an online parenting forum and found that mothers who experienced DV talked about how their son’s violence made it challenging to parent. More recently, Williams, Tuffin, and Niland (2016) interviewed mothers and found that the psychological trauma of domestic violence and CPV impacted their parenting and led to intense shame. These studies highlight how theories of permissive parenting do not accurately describe complex trauma responses by mothers.

Causal theories for CPV based on permissive/lax parenting do not accurately reflect mothers’ protective parenting decisions. First of all, Holt (2011) found that mothers stated that they would minimise the violence for fear of their children being removed from their care by the child protection system and for fear that their children would enter the juvenile justice system. In this sense, mothers’ parenting decisions were made to protect their children from legal consequences and to protect the family from being broken apart. An Australian study by Jackson (2003) interviewed six mothers who experienced CPV and found that both their trauma responses to violence and fear of their children being removed were the predominant factors that influenced their parenting decisions. Therefore, permissive/lax parenting terminology does not adequately reflect protective parenting decisions by mothers and new language is needed to describe their experience. Without a greater understanding of the complexities at work in CPV, professionals run the risk of further alienating a

population who are already marginalised. Furthermore, ignoring the complexities of how CPV manifests itself within the child/mother dyad may lead to ineffective interventions for families, which may contribute to young people becoming involved in the judicial system.

LIMITATIONS OF DISCOURSES ON CPV AND THEIR IMPACT ON SERVICE DELIVERY

The critical flaw within the current conceptualisation of CPV is that it neglects gender, power, coercive control and decades of domestic/family violence research. At its heart, CPV (more accurately, child/adolescent-to-mother abuse), is a gendered form of violence which targets mothers (Hunter, 2010). Sheehan (1997) argues that we need to place CPV within a larger, gendered context of violence toward women in society. Furthermore, research on CPV within a domestic violence context, that focuses on instances of violent behaviour does not take into account beliefs that perpetuate the violence and the trauma the adolescent experienced while themselves witnessing domestic violence (Bobic, 2004). Simply focusing on the violent acts and not the context within the family, and within society, does not accurately represent the complexity of this type of violence.

Understanding causation of CPV is difficult, with permissive parenting explanations having a number of key limitations. Viewing CPV as specific instances of violence towards “parents” is inaccurate and may be harmful. Firstly, this construction of CPV does not take into account how girls use violence against their mothers (McCarry & Lombard, 2016). Also, this definition of CPV can lead to poor service delivery and lack of adequate supports for the family. A study of professionals in England found that inaccurate definitions of CPV led to service providers missing instances of violence in the family (Holt & Retford, 2013). In the case of conceiving CPV as social learning, other forms of violence and violence by girls towards mothers would largely be dismissed. Moreover, social learning theory’s focus on the behaviour and not the larger context within the family may devalue the mothers’ experience. For example, an Australian study of child-to-parent violence programs found that focusing on children’s behaviour and disregarding the mother’s experience perpetuated feelings of shame in mothers (Edenborough et al., 2008). Furthermore, Holt and Retford interviewed service providers and mothers in England and found that mothers experienced a “double stigma” through service providers not listening to their domestic violence and CPV experience (2013). These women stated that they were not supported, which led to feelings of shame and guilt (Holt & Retford, 2013). Therefore, services who construct adolescent-to-parent abuse in accordance with social learning theory run the risk of privileging the child’s behaviour over the mother’s experience, which can lead to shame and further isolating her, while at the same time providing the adolescent with more sophisticated justifications for the use of violence, thereby leading to further victimisation.

MOTHERS’ VOICES WITHIN THE LITERATURE

Even though a number of studies indicate that mothers are the primary victims of CPV, they do not explore mothers’ perspectives of CPV. For example, Downey (1997) argues that definitions of CPV that focus on instances of physical abuse oversimplifies violence and devalues the experience of the victim, which is generally the mother. Research, from

a number of different disciplines, such as the legal system, social work and counseling, contends that the lack of a gendered understanding of CPV leads to women feeling marginalised and isolated (Holt, 2011; Howard, Nixon, & Parr, 2010; Jackson, 2003; Williams et al., 2016).

Edenborough et al. (2008) found that mothers described their experience with CPV counseling programs as problematic. They report that the services minimised their experience which resulted in a reduction in help-seeking behaviours. Other interviews with mothers found that, along with shame and guilt, mothers report being traumatised by the violence and not wanting to report it to professionals (Williams et al., 2016). In addition, mothers' fear frequently acts as a barrier to help-seeking. Holt (2011) analysed mothers' posts on a parenting blog and found that mothers experiencing violence were scared that, if they reported the violence, their children would be removed from their care. This led to high rates of severe violence before an initial intervention, which was usually a police intervention (Holt, 2011). These studies shed light on the complex dynamics and emotions involved in adolescent-to-parent abuse. Conceptualising the phenomenon as child/adolescent-to-mother abuse values her experience and may help organisations work towards reducing feelings of guilt and shame, which might increase help seeking.

EMERGING RESEARCH INTO NEURO-DISABILITY AND CPV

One further limitation of both permissive parenting and social learning theory is that they do not account for emerging neuro-disability research. Recent research into CPV highlights possible connections between CPV and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children and adolescents. Interviews and surveys of victims of CPV conducted in Victoria, Australia by Monash University found that 22 of the 120 survey responses mentioned ASD, ADHD, Asperger's Syndrome, or a combination of them (Fitz-Gibbon, Elliott, & Maher, 2018). These findings support Holt's (2016) overview of the literature on the intersection between such disorders and CPV. However, Coogan (2018) warns researchers, and practitioners, that neuro-disability and mental health diagnosis are not concrete causal factors for CPV. In this sense, mental health diagnosis may indicate a CPV risk factor, which may increase one's understanding of CPV, as opposed to a fixed causal link (Coogan, 2018). Even though neuro-disability research does not draw direct causal links between diagnosis and CPV, it highlights the complexity of CPV and requires further study.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND CPV

Even though studies on substance abuse and CPV lie outside this review's gendered focus, it is important to note their place in the literature. Galvani (2016) interviewed family support group providers and found that, along with domestic violence exposure, children and adolescents who used violence had high levels of substance abuse. High levels of substance use are strongly associated with violence towards parents for both boys and girls; however, boys tend to use physical violence slightly more than girls when substance use is a factor (Calvete, Orue, & Gamez-Gaudix, 2013). However, the connection between substance use and violence is complex and it is not only reserved for intoxicated adolescents being violent

towards their parents. For example, substance use may not only increase aggressiveness, but it can also be the focus of the violent incident. In these violent incidents, boys and girls use a range of violence including physical, verbal and emotional abuse (Calvete, Gamez-Gaudix, Orue, Gonzalez-Diez, et al., 2013). Research into substance use and violence illustrates the necessity for service providers to be aware of substance use when working with families experiencing child/adolescent-to-mother abuse.

CHILD/ADOLESCENT-TO-MOTHER ABUSE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Even though CPV has been explored in the literature since 1979, critical gaps remain. One clear dilemma is the lack of an adequate conceptualisation of the violence, which reflects the gendered nature of the phenomenon. Definitions that focus on strictly physical abuse do not accurately embody the complex relational/family contexts within the child/adolescent and mother dyad. In order to respect the primary victim of violence while also accurately describing the pattern power and control within these families, it is imperative that researchers and practitioners move towards a child/adolescent-to-mother abuse framework. This lens will enable practitioners to more effectively support both young people and women experiencing child/adolescent-to-mother abuse.

Holt and Retford's (2013) work with social services in London underscores the importance of a child/adolescent-to-mother abuse conceptualisation. They found that excluding coercive control behaviours, such as emotional, verbal, financial and psychological abuse, from the definition creates fractured service delivery that does not adequately support mothers and families in need (2013). Fractured service delivery may lead to families missing out on support and professionals not adequately identifying instances of child/adolescent-to-mother abuse. Therefore, it is imperative to develop a definition in the academic literature which reflects what mothers are experiencing in their daily lives, in order to guide service providers on the ground. Most importantly, a universal definition of child/adolescent-to-mother abuse will help service providers develop effective intervention programs for young people, which may not only help young people avoid police intervention, but may also have an impact on these young people continuing to use violence in future intimate relationships (Reyes et al., 2015).

Another large gap in the literature concerns research into mothers' experiences. By not including mothers' voices in the research, the CPV academic literature itself mirrors the isolation, shame and blame they currently experience. In essence, keeping mothers' voices silent and focusing primarily on the perpetrators' behaviour sends the message that their experience is not valuable. Literature focusing on permissive parenting reinforces blame and grossly undervalues the complex emotions and trauma within mothers' experiences. One challenge for future research is to establish less threatening ways to recruit this difficult-to-reach population and to ensure that their voices are heard.

Research on the impact of domestic violence on the mother's attachment and parenting authority is missing from the literature. There are decades of domestic violence research that highlights how DV perpetrators use violence to continually undermine mothers' parental authority and erode their attachments with their children (Fish, McKenzie, &

McDonald, 2009; Buckley, Holt, & Whelan, 2008; Keeshin, Oxman, Schindler, & Campbell, 2015). However, literature on links between DV and CPV largely dismisses the complex power and control dynamics present in domestic violence. Recent research indicates that there are a range of complex familial violence factors which manifest themselves in the mother–child relationship (Gabriel et al., 2018). However, more research needs to be done to bridge the gap between domestic/family violence research and the impacts of parenting and attachment on child/adolescent-to-mother abuse.

CONCLUSION

Permissive parenting conceptualisations of child/adolescent-to-mother abuse are not nuanced enough to adequately reflect a mother's trauma responses and protective parenting decisions. Dominant views of permissive parenting as a causal and maintaining factor for abuse have negative impacts on service delivery, obscure rates of mothers as the primary target of abuse and may blame mothers for the abuse. Therefore, a new framework and language is needed to describe child/adolescent abuse towards mothers; especially where domestic/family violence exposure is a factor. Without a more nuanced view of child/adolescent-to-mother abuse, professional support services are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past and continue to marginalise mothers who desperately need evidence-informed support.

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