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TECHNOLOGY, STRESS, AND FAMILY VIOLENCE; SOME ISSUES IN TEACHING SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Abstract

This paper examines family violence. Specifically, the variables most often associated with this phenomenon are discussed. As part of this analysis, a model for assessing family violence is proposed. It is noted, however, that this mode of assessment differs in many ways from technologically oriented methodologies. Moreover, the social work profession must come to recognize the difference between community sensitive and technological models, or misinformed social policies may be the result.

Introduction

Words such as stress, alienation, and isolation are often heard in relation to technological development. These same terms are used when describing violent behavior in the family. The stress that results from unemployment, underemployment, job dissatisfaction, or isolation brought about by job relocation, for example, is commonly identified as a primary cause of family violence.

Accordingly, the two primary objectives of this paper are to examine the impact of stress on families that are prone to violence and to relate some of these issues to social work education. These implications will be discussed in terms of organizing the practice component of the social work curriculum.

Developing the context of family violence

In order to discuss the relationship of stress to family violence it is necessary to define the terms family, violence, and stress. For purposes of this discussion, the definition of the family proposed by Hartman and

Laird (1983) is used. They describe two types of families, the "family of origin" and "family of intimate environment". The former includes the nuclear family or the "blood family", the extended family, and the fictive kin or those who are considered by function as members of the family unit. The second term they borrow from the work of Skolnik. The 'family of intimate environment' includes those who have made an emotional commitment to one another and "share a variety of family roles and function".

The term "violence" is defined by various authors. There are two definitions which are more helpful than others. Marmor (1978) defines violence as "a specific form of force that involves the effort to destroy or injure an object perceived as an actual or potential source of frustration or danger." In 1979 O'Malley, in her statement prepared for a hearing of the Select Committee on Aging of the U.S. House of Representatives, defined violence as the "intentional, non-accidental use of physical force." According to these definitions, violence may occur between any members of a family, such as siblings, parent and child, spouses, or adult children and their elderly parents.

Stress may be viewed as resulting from life events or changes (both pleasant and unpleasant) which require a person to utilize some form of coping behaviors. In terms of those who study family violence the following definition of stress is generally accepted: "Stress is a function of the interaction of the subjectively defined demands of a situation and the capabilities of an individual or group to respond to these demands" (Straus, Gelles, Steinmetz, 1981, p. 270). Stress is not merely a psychological property, but includes a person's life situation where events are encountered.

Another task in developing the context of family violence is to discuss the incidence with which it occurs. Parent to child violence may range from spanking which was approved by 94% of the parents in one study (Steinmetz, 1977) to the 1.7 to 2 million cases per year which are severe enough to be considered child abuse (Strauss, 1980 and O'Malley, 1980). Of those abuse incidents, more than 1,000 per year result in death (Mayhall and Norgard, 1983). Sibling to sibling violence is so common as to be accepted by most parents with little more than a shrug (Steinmetz, 1977). And estimates of marital violence range from 1.8 million incidents (Freeman, 1979) to 3 million per year (Green, 1980). Martin cites FBI statistics that 25% of all murders occur within

the family, while one-half of those were husband-wife killings. There are no statistics as to the incidence of the abuse of elderly persons, although estimates range from 50,000 to one million per year. Many of the elderly who are abused are mistreated by their adult children in whose home they live (Steinmetz, 1981; O'Malley, 1980; Milt, 1982; Freeman, 1979; Davidson, 1979).

In terms of understanding the context of family violence, various causes have been identified by researchers and scholars. For the purpose of this discussion, five variables are cited most often in the literature as contributing to family violence. From the literature and from many years of professional social work practice, these factors are known to constitute a set of inter-related variables. The presence of any one would not likely precipitate an incident of violence. However, if all five variables are present a person may resort to violence as a way of coping. These five variables are: 1) violent behavior is accepted as normal; 2) a parent was abused as a child; 3) the family is structured on the basis of power relationships; 4) inadequate communication patterns exist for resolving problems; and 5) stress is present in the family situation. The object of this paper is to understand the significance of stress in this model.

Stress and Family Violence

As already mentioned, stress may be viewed as resulting from changes or life situations which require coping abilities. Three of the most common sources of stress relate to unemployment, underemployment, and relocation due to employment. In addition, there are stresses due to isolation that result from the absence of a support network.

Keefe (1983) identifies four consequences of unemployment -- physiological, psychological, interpersonal, and sociological. In terms of this discussion, the last three are most important.

The psychological impacts cited were a loss of self-esteem, loss of personal identity, uncertainty about the future, a loss of purpose, and depression.

In relation to interpersonal factors, Keefe presents two ideas about interpersonal relationships. The first is that persons need to be valued by those who they consider to be "significant others." The second is that

persons faced with actual or impending unemployment may behave in such a way that they reject others and become cut off from potential sources of support. Accordingly, this perceived lack of support tends to exacerbate an already bad situation.

In terms of the sociological side of this issue, Keefe identifies dissatisfaction with employment as well as unemployment as a cause of personal alienation, because workers perceive that they are not regarded as individuals, that they cannot control the condition of their work, or the destiny of the final products. He describes their relationships at the workplace as impersonal, formal, and regulated. Along with this alienation, when workers become unemployed they also lose the capacity to be a consumer. All these losses culminate in a loss of esteem. Steinmetz (1978) indicates that males view both unemployment and job dissatisfaction as a threat to their self-esteem because they perceive themselves unable to fulfill the role of family provider.

For females, the problem of unemployment is compounded by child care and single parenthood. Due to the increase in divorces and births out of wedlock, the number of single parent, female headed households has doubled since 1940 in this country. These women, as well as young married women, work because of economic necessity. On a national average, the income for women is about one-half that of men. Furthermore, about one-half of the children living in a one-parent family live in poverty (Kadushin, 1980). This would certainly seem to indicate that women are locked into low paying jobs with little hope for improving their situations. This condition would certainly be an indicator of a high level of job dissatisfaction and consequent stress.

In addition to unemployment and job dissatisfaction, relocation may also be a source of stress. About 20% of the population in the U. S. moves each year, and about one-half of these moves are job-related. This produces stress for all members of the family. Although the husband may be in a relatively familiar business situation, co-workers, neighbors, and the environment are new. In addition, if he has been promoted, he may believe he needs to prove his ability in the new position. Because of the husband's change of job, his wife may suffer the loss of family, friends, and possibly a job. For her this may result in a feeling of being trapped, a loss of self-esteem, and extreme loneliness. For the children involved, the loss of a peer group, a familiar school setting and contact with their extended family usually occurs. Frequently, relocation is

reported to result in increased marital conflict and difficulties with children (Gaylord, 1979).

Yet are stress and family violence related? Many authors state there is a correlation that indicates a strong relationship between the two (Gil, 1970; Keefe, 1984; Steinmetz, 1978; Stacey and Shupe, 1983). Consistently the statistics shown in newspapers and on national news reports have indicated that with the rise in unemployment, there is concomitant rise in the rate of child abuse.

Unfortunately there are no national statistics kept about other forms of family violence. However, there are some research studies which are helpful. Strauss (1980), in a national sample of married couples, concluded that stress does make couples more prone to the use of violence. Yet this is not a direct relationship. He correlated stress with the rate of assault by husbands using seven intervening variables. For example, although high levels of stress were noted, husbands reported from three to five times higher levels of violence when they approved of slapping a spouse, expressed low marital satisfaction, were authoritarian, and seldom participated in organizations outside of the family. Additionally, when either parent of the husband was reported to have hit the other, much higher levels of violence were noted.

Neldig and Friedman (1984) used the Social Readjustment Scale developed by Holmes and Rahe to measure the "amount of stressful experiences dealt with by clients." Those who were involved in violent episodes had a score of 416 as compared to 260 for non-violent subjects. The authors concluded that:

spouse abuse generally occurs during periods of high stress for the couple. Various measures of stress are predictive of the frequency, but not necessarily the severity of violent episodes.

If it is true that stress mediated by social conditions is related to family violence, how does this affect teaching social work practice?

Issues in Teaching Social Work Practice

Both the instructor and the students must recognize that values may be a determining factor in how well they deal with family violence, and how effectively intervention strategies are taught. Most important is to

identify the relevant points of value conflict.

An awareness of this problem may be promoted on the part of students by discussing societal values pertaining to violence in general and family violence in particular. Values to be dealt with include those pertaining to the use of violence to demonstrate authority, social equality among persons, the rights of women and children, the importance of the family unit, and the right to the opportunity for maximum growth and development.

Probably the greatest difficulties arise when professionals encounter clients with very different value systems. Readings such as "Not with My Daughter You Don't" by Hardman (1977) are valuable in opening a discussion about value differences between worker and client. Thus students can recognize value differences, foster their clients' self-determination, and develop a toleration for persons who are very different from themselves. Often role playing enables students to experience a setting very different from any they may have previously encountered. For example, having a student play the role of a battered woman whose only resource is the women's shelter will put a student in touch with his or her feelings and values.

Another second issue pertains to training a student to recognize the existence of or the potential for violent behavior in family situations. As previously noted in the discussion about stress, other variables interact with stress to produce family violence. To those already discussed should be added another. Specifically, the communication patterns in violent families are most often inadequate for problem solving. Since dialogue among family members is not encouraged, problems continue to increase until a crisis occurs. And if other conditions that lead to violence are present, one member of the family may attack another.

After recognizing the existence of or potential for violence in the family, social work students must develop the skills of assessment necessary to develop and implement treatment goals. Students must first be taught how to explore a problem. Many models for problem exploration exist. Hepworth and Larsen (1982), for example, propose a sequence of specific points which are vital for clarifying a problem. The information to be covered includes: 1) the client's description of the problem, or when, where, how often, and over what period of time it has occurred; 2) the verbal and emotional responses of family members to

the problematic event; 3) the meaning the event has for a client; 4) the corrective steps a client has taken to deal with the problem; and 5) the goal to be achieved with regard to solving the problem.

Because violent family members characteristically have difficulties with communication, particular attention may have to be directed to how these clients express themselves, the meaning of the information communicated, how it is communicated, and who is involved in all communication. This provides data not only on interaction patterns, but insight into the abilities and self-concepts of the various family members, the norms and rules which influence the cognitive/perceptual world of these persons, and the means whereby dysfunctional communication systems can be corrected.

By developing an understanding of the life situation and meaning of human behavior, students may learn to assist a client to identify alternative behaviors which may help to alleviate family violence. In this sense, family-sensitive behavioral goals may be established. The development of situationally sensitive goals, however, requires that family members participate fully in the formulation of all treatment plans.

And once treatment goals are outlined, a plan for the attainment of these aims is necessary. A typical goal, for example, may be to stop or reduce violent episodes. The assessment phase serves the purpose of assisting the client to identify and clarify events or stressors which trigger these episodes and the reactions that follow. The formulation of a treatment plan may include discussing with clients their feelings of anger, frustration, alienation, and isolation. Yet the most important challenge to the social worker is to teach students to use these cues for setting concrete and measurable goals. For example, Neidig and Friedman (1984) suggest that anger control is central to the treatment of those who engage in family violence. Because clients who engage in violence often have difficulty expressing themselves they often become withdrawn, thus leading to increased tension and an eventual aggressive outburst. Once a client's values, beliefs, and cognitive distortions are explored during assessment, he or she can be asked to keep a record of the times angry feelings occur. Then alternative reactions can be explored. An additional step might include assisting a client to learn to express his or her feelings in an assertive manner, which enables other family members to understand these emotions and deal with them rationally.

Techniques for teaching this content to students may include standard resources such as case illustrations, role play, use of a video-tape recorder, and using volunteer experiences. All of these offer an opportunity for students to discuss attitudes, explore various types of treatment strategies, and engage in self-reflection. Of course, these are all essential for professional growth. Particularly the volunteer experience provides students an opportunity to encounter actual clients and observe other professionals. In other words, it provides a "hands-on" experience with a minimum amount of responsibility.

Summary: The Technological Attitude and Treatment.

As should be noted, the model that has been proposed for assessing and treating family violence requires that insight be gained into the operation of this institution. Accordingly, the family cannot be treated as an objective "thing", but must be understood as network of interaction. A proper understanding of violence among family members, therefore, requires that their values, beliefs, and perceptions be appreciated.

Nonetheless, the technological outlook which has come to dominate society, and may inundate the social work profession, diminishes the importance of such insight. From the technological point of view, only so-called objective data are to be admitted as evidence. When this is the case, however, the human condition is obscured, not to mention the situational nature of family violence.

A few examples should serve to illustrate this point. First, the technological method tends to be reductionistic and analyze phenomena in terms of simple causal relationships (A → B). As has been indicated, family violence should not be assessed in this manner, because of the complex nature of this problem. Rather, a multi-dimensional model is required to conceptualize how the variables associated with family violence are related.

Second, values are insignificant for a technologically oriented need assessment. Yet, as those who study family violence have come to recognize, behavior is fully mediated by value judgements. Without an understanding of the value base of behavior, only speculation is available concerning human motivation.

Third, because communication is central to the family system, social

workers must be sensitive to the meanings conveyed by language. Nonetheless, language is ignored by technology, unless it is mathematics. Thus, this mode of assessment provides little insight into what clients mean when they speak. Many writers today, however, contend that language holds the key to human understanding.

And fourth, rational treatment planning requires that clients must participate in the formulation of their therapeutic regimen. From a technological point of view this is worthless, because human opinion may come to occlude the "facts" of a case. Yet without input from clients only standard treatment procedures may be applied, which may be insensitive to a particular case. Nowadays practitioners are coming to recognize that clients will adhere to a treatment plan most effectively when they participate in its formulation.

In sum, social workers must be aware of how the technological outlook may narrow their vision, particularly when conducting social assessments. Unless this awareness is promoted by the professional, socially insensitive intervention may become the norm. From the technological standpoint, however, such objectivity is assumed to be rational and efficient. Nonetheless, in the long-run the social character of problems such as family violence may be overlooked, thus promoting the development of misinformed policies. Eventually this could prove to be socially disastrous.

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