Family Violence

an international and interdisciplinary study

John M. Eekelaar
Sanford N. Katz

With an Introduction by Anthony Storr

BUTTERWORTHS

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Introduction

*Anthony Storr**

Although most people would probably agree in supposing that the family is the best milieu in which to rear children, it must nevertheless be recognized that home is a dangerous place. For it is within the family that the majority of homicides occur. On both sides of the Atlantic, "murder is overwhelmingly a domestic crime, in which men kill their wives, mistresses and children, and women kill their children."[1] As Norval Morris has put it: "You are safer on the streets than at home; safer with a stranger than with a friend or relative."[2]

We like to think of the family as the abode of love; of home as a safe retreat where any member of the family is sure of support and protection; of grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles and children as a closely-linked network of individuals who will stand united in the face of threat. The reality is rather different. Whenever human beings are held together by ties of love, whether that love is primarily erotic or supportive, aggressive tensions are also inescapable. It is our nearest and dearest who are most notably capable of provoking our intensest rage; and many of us find ourselves more easily capable of sympathetically identifying ourselves with murderers than with any other type of criminal.

Of course, it can be argued that serious violence within the family is abnormal; and I am not suggesting that homicide can be looked upon as an habitual ingredient of domestic life. But I do maintain that violence within the family is not in a category apart: that it is an exaggeration of aggressive tensions of a normal kind which are to be found in every home; and that we shall only understand violence if we also understand something about the ordinary aggressive impulses which operate within us all.

Human childhood, compared with that of other animals, is enormously prolonged relative to the total life-span of the human being. We take an unconscionable time to become grown-up. Moreover, human infants are born into the world in a peculiarly helpless state. The biological reason for this is, of course, the fact that human adaptation to the world is largely through learning, rather than by means of instinct. Human young need to be, for a very long time, both dependent and malleable, if they are to have the maximum opportunity of learning from those who are more experienced. But this helplessness and prolongation of dependency carries with it disadvantages as well as advantages. For helplessness can easily be made humiliating, and dependency necessarily involves restriction. Humiliation and restriction are potent instigators of violence in adults; but we can see their precursors in normal human infants.

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As psychoanalysts see it, the baby begins life as part of the mother and only gradually comes to realize his separate identity. As he gradually becomes aware of his own body boundaries, that is, the distinction between self and not-self, he also becomes aware that there is something or someone 'out there' who is essential to the fulfilment of his needs. Because of the way in which we in the West rear our infants, we are generally more aware of the baby's demands for closeness than of his demands for separateness. Babies who spend much of their time in a perambulator at the end of the garden would, if they could speak, be more likely to complain that they were not getting enough contact with their mothers than that they were getting too much. But the stage is soon reached when the baby becomes independently mobile, and at that point he begins to show resentment if his movements are interfered with. Although he needs to return to the mother to find support and warm contact, he also needs to differentiate himself from her and to define himself as a separate entity. For this purpose a certain amount of aggression is essential; and if even a very small child never showed any aggression toward those who protect, and therefore restrict it, we should rightly suppose that there was something essential missing from its make-up. The degree of restriction we impose upon very small children is intensified by the conditions of urban life, where many dangers, like automobiles, which are absent in primitive societies, threaten those who are not yet equipped to look after themselves.

What we might call 'normal' aggression shows itself even more obviously at around the age of three or four. Here, not only restriction, but feelings of humiliation, play their part. The small child who is just learning to do things for itself will normally resent adult interference, often stamping with rage when a well-meaning adult offers to do up a button or feed it unnecessarily. One of the most frequent complaints which adult patients in psychotherapy have against their mothers is that the latter were too much in a hurry, taking out of their hands tasks which, given time, they would perfectly well have been able to complete unaided, and from which they would have got a sense of achievement. Never to be allowed to do things for oneself is both restrictive and humiliating.

This kind of aggressive self-assertion which, if not handled wisely, may give rise to violence, continues throughout childhood to reach a peak in adolescence, when further separation from the parents is necessary if the child is to break free of the restrictions of home and make new relationships in order, eventually, to create his own new and separate family. A certain amount of aggressiveness necessarily underpins the sense of identity. For how can one affirm identity without asserting difference? Adolescents, who are notoriously insecure, tend to cause unnecessary strife within the family by asserting differences from parents with too strident a voice; but, however much we may resent our 'teen-age young', we ought to be even more worried if they show no aggression towards us at all. Adults who, in their anxiety to please and their fear of any disagreement, have repressed most of their aggression, become nonentities. Psychologically, they have no separate identities, simply echoing the opinions of whoever they happen to be with. Authoritarian parents used to be blamed by their adolescent children for being dogmatic and disciplinarian. Today, many adolescents blame their parents for being too understanding and compliant. For how can one differentiate oneself from a parent who never disagrees nor asserts his own opinions? Parents who are too understanding, and who identify too closely with their children's problems, create difficulties for them in that they make the process of rebellion and differentiation something which is hedged around with guilt.

Normal aggressiveness within the family is, of course, not simply a matter of tensions between parents and children. Children are notoriously quarrelsome between themselves. They compete with each other for the parents' affection, vie with one another physically, and play games in which the archetypal theme is one of conquest. The Victorians, who in their false idealization of childhood, supposed that children were as innocent of aggression as they were of sex, treated quarrels as sin. In that children's classic *The Fairchild Family,* when Mr. Fairchild found two of his children quarrelling, his first response was to whip them, and his second to take them to view the corpse of a criminal who had murdered his brother, suspended in chains from a gibbet. This was to serve as a warning; a demonstration of what happened to children who did not love their siblings.

Today we regard quarrelling as an inescapable and necessary part of growing up. Children who have no siblings to quarrel with are at a disadvantage when they reach the larger world of school because they have not learned the give-and-take of aggressive exchanges, and do not know how to stand up for themselves. Research with subhuman primates has demonstrated that rough-and-tumble play and other forms of aggressive interaction with peers are essential if the young primate is to learn how to interact socially; that is, when to stand up and fight and when to give in. Dominance-submission interactions are part of primate social life, including our own; but the individual's place in the pecking order has to be learned gradually, through repeated encounters. Neurotic human beings very often show inappropriate aggressive responses because they have not mixed with others at the appropriate stage in childhood. Such people tend habitually to be submissive, but, if they do finally become aggressive, grossly overdo it. A great deal of human violence seems to be the worm turning; the person who has felt comparatively weak and helpless suddenly reversing this role.

In a recently published book, *The Deadly Innocents,*[3] the psychoanalyst, Muriel Gardiner, tells the story of Tom. Tom was a rejected child whose mother banned him from mixing with the rest of the family. He was kept in a shed at the end of the garden, and whipped if he made any attempt to get in touch with his ten siblings. Eventually he became delinquent. When the facts of his family life came before the juvenile court, he was taken away from home and put in the care of an uncle and aunt. Unfortunately, the uncle turned out to be a violent alcoholic who resented Tom, and who treated him almost as cruelly as had his mother. Tom managed to find a stray kitten with a broken leg which he tended with great care and gentleness. The kitten was the first creature with whom he developed ties of affection. One afternoon his uncle came home early from work, and in a fit of rage, strangled the kitten in front of Tom. When Tom attempted to bury it, the uncle trod the little cross he had made into the ground, destroying the grave. At this point Tom seized one of his uncle's guns and shot his uncle, his aunt and another woman who was living in the house.

In this case, as in many others, the ultimate act of violence occurs against a background of repeated humiliation and cruelty. The trigger may or may not be something quite trivial.

The story of Tom illustrates several points which I want to emphasize. First, many violent acts are committed by persons who have been made to feel humiliated, ineffective, and of no account. Secondly, the resentment which finally issues in violence often goes back a long way, so that the person who is attacked

represents not only himself, but a whole series of other persons who have caused humiliation. Thirdly, isolation in early childhood, whether it is physical, as in Tom's case, or emotional, as in the case of children who fail to make affective ties with their peers, makes it more likely that an aggressive response will be inappropriately violent.

Tom's case is not so exceptional as we would like to think. Throughout most of the history of Western civilization, children have been abominably treated. A recent book by ten American historians entitled *The History of Childhood* begins: "The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken. The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized, and sexually abused."[4] Some children who have been treated cruelly grow up into adults who are themselves habitually inconsiderate and cruel, and who adopt the defence of pretending that human relationships mean nothing to them. Others remain cowed and submissive. On analysis, both kinds of person are found to have a deep sense of inadequacy.

I think we must assume that human children have a built-in expectation of affection and personal regard. Even if children are not treated with actual cruelty, but merely somewhat impersonally, as happens in many institutions, they develop a tendency toward resentment of other human beings which is very hard to erase. The long period of helplessness which we all experience as infants demands a great deal of special attention, reassurance, and loving care to make us feel that we are worth anything at all. Looked at from the point of view of a detached observer, the praise which the average, loving mother lavishes upon the trivial achievements of her infant — his first steps, or his first words, for instance — is glutinously sentimental; but those who have never experienced the irrational delights of feeling themselves, however briefly, to be the most important person in the world, tend to spend the rest of their lives looking for precisely that experience. I remember one maternally deprived woman, for example, whose emotional life consisted in forming passionate attachments to one older woman after another, in the vain hope of finding the ideal mother whom she had never had. So intense was her desire to be 'special', the adored baby, the most important person, that she passionately resented any attention which her mother surrogate might pay to anyone else. In addition, she needed to know, every minute of the day, where her adored maternal substitute might be. Co-existent with this intense emotional dependence was an equally intense rage, which manifested itself in jealousy. She came to the attention of psychiatrists only because she received a prison sentence for making a murderous attack upon the woman to whom she was at that time attached, supposing that the woman was taking an interest in someone else.

The study of parents who batter their children bears out what I have said about the relation of violence with feelings of helplessness. For such parents seem to have been made to feel, in the words of Steele and Pollock, that all they did was "erroneous, inadequate and ineffectual."[5] Even more or less normal parents know what it is to be reduced to impotence by a child who will not stop crying; and I find it easy to understand that parents who themselves have been disregarded and humiliated very easily feel threatened even by a baby. Helplessness, in animals as well as humans, generally evokes protective and cherishing responses, and is

inhibitory of aggression. But these basic biological behavior patterns are easily overridden in humans; and one of the most distasteful aspects of human psychology is the fact that, once violence has begun to be used against the helpless, helplessness not only loses its capacity to inhibit, but may actually increase the use of violence. When animals of the same species engage in contests, the loser is generally allowed to go free; but men seldom let their defeated enemies escape, and often treat their helpless victims with the utmost cruelty, as if they were still a threat.

There seems little doubt that those who have themselves been neglected or ill-treated as children are more prone to treat others likewise. This argues that much human cruelty is really revenge. Revenge requires a long memory, and it may be argued that those who have been neglected or ill-treated in infancy are incapable of revenge, since they cannot recall events which took place so early in life. I am not a Kleinian, and I have never convinced myself that patients can accurately remember the emotions which they experienced during the first few months of life. But this does not mean that neglect and ill-treatment leave no traces, and every analyst must have seen a number of tragically disturbed patients who, although they cannot recall their very early childhood, give evidence of having suffered considerable trauma in that they are unable to regard the analyst, or indeed any other human being, as anything other than a malignant persecutor. The surgeon, George Crile, in his book, *A Naturalistic View of Man,* suggests an explanation of how infantile trauma can continue to operate, although it cannot be consciously remembered.

> The experiences of early childhood are firmly recorded in the lower centres of the old brain and exert a profound effect on subsequent behavior. However, they are isolated and inviolable. There is no way for them to become connected with the interpretive (temporal) cortex which has not yet developed, and hence they can never be either retrieved as memories or altered by comparison with subsequent experiences. They are like the patterns of behavior that are inherited as instincts, or are acquired as a result of imprintation.[6]

I find this explanation illuminating, although it sheds a depressing light upon some of our patients in that it implies that some basically pathological behavior patterns are incapable of modification by any means at our disposal.

However, although I believe that those who have been ill-treated are more prone to violence, I also think that a violent potential exists in every one of us. For each of us knows what it is to be entirely in the power of others; to be so helpless that our simplest physical needs have to be attended to by others; to be picked up, put down, moved around or left to cry entirely at the whim of others. However benign his parents, the small child cannot be unaware of his own helplessness, nor fail to resent the fact that he is entirely at the mercy of creatures much larger and more powerful than himself. No wonder Thomas Szasz begins his book of aphorisms, *The Second Sin,* by affirming that "childhood is a prison sentence of twenty-one years."[7]

Traces of our infantile experience persist in every one of us, and show themselves particularly in phantasies and other imaginative products. It is interesting that the horrific aspects of being in the power of others predominate, even when we might have supposed that a particular infant's experience was mostly benign. Swift,

admittedly, was plagued by his obsessional temperament, and cannot be regarded as psychiatrically normal, but he is surely depicting a universal infantile experience when he writes of Gulliver visiting Brobdingnag, the land of giants. "That which gave me most Uneasiness among those Maids of Honour, when my Nurse carried me to visit them, was to see them use me without any Manner or Ceremony like a Creature who had no Sort of Consequence."[8] Kafka, in his terrifying novels, depicts a world in which authority is both inaccessible and capricious; in which decisions are taken with no reference to those whose lives are affected by them. In one passage in *The Trial* Kafka describes how a manufacturer and a bank official confer together about a scheme which the main protagonist of the novel, K., has put forward. "Then as the two of them leaned against his desk, and the manufacturer set himself to win the newcomer's approval for his scheme, it seemed to K. as though two giants of enormous size were bargaining above his head for himself."[9]

The fear of being at the mercy of malignant persecutors has become a reality in totalitarian states, where dissenters are treated in ways which one's worst phantasies have hardly encompassed; but, even when such a threat is neither real nor immediate, it is not difficult to persuade ordinary people that they are in danger from persons possessing evil powers. An infantile world, peopled not only by giants, but by demons and witches, exists below the surface in us all and can be brought to the surface when we are threatened by personal or collective disaster.

The history of anti-Semitism amply demonstrates that normal people can easily be persuaded, for example, that there is an international conspiracy of Jews dedicated to world domination. In the past, Jews have been viewed not only as potential dominators, but as poisoners, torturers, castrators, and ritual murderers, a collective embodiment of evil. At least some of the Nazi leaders had a megalomaniac sense of mission in which they were playing the noble role of exterminating evil.

It is easy enough to see the sinister role which paranoid projection plays in the case of people who are actually or potentially powerful. What is more difficult to understand is how the same mechanism operates in cases where the person conceived as evil is obviously weak, as in the case of a child, or a member of an outcaste group. However, there is no doubt that, in instances in which conventional power is lacking, the person designated as evil is often imagined to possess magical powers for harm. During the great European persecutions of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, countless old women were burned as witches whose actual potential for 'maleficium' — that is, for harm to others — was minimal. In Japan, the outcaste group called the Burakumin are at a considerable disadvantage economically and educationally compared with the ordinary Japanese. Yet these people are regarded as polluting, that is, as magically poisonous; and 'poisonous' is of course an adjective which any of us may apply to someone we particularly dislike, as if they have some kind of contaminating effect upon those with whom they associate.

Pariah castes act as scapegoats for the tensions within a society. They not only provide an outgroup to which even the lowliest legitimate members of the society can feel superior, but also can be blamed for everything evil within the society.

Exactly the same phenomenon occurs within families. Tom, the boy who killed his uncle and aunt, was not allowed to come into contact with his brothers and sisters, as if he was in some way contaminating. R.D. Laing and his collaborators have often drawn attention to the way in which psychotic symptoms are manifested by members of families who have been forced into the role of scapegoat. It has often been assumed that children are essentially evil, the embodiments of original sin. In order to subdue the devil within, severe restraint and savage punishment has been thought justifiable, almost from the moment of birth. In *The History of Childhood* one mother wrote of her son: "I whipped him till he was actually black and blue, and until I could not whip him any more, and he never gave up a single inch."[10] The boy was four months old.

The lower a person's sense of self-esteem, the more does he have recourse to paranoid mechanisms to sustain what little feeling of worth he possesses, and the more vulnerable he is to having that little undermined. It is the insecure and inadequate who most easily feel threatened, and who resort to violence as a primitive way of restoring dominance.

One way of making the inadequate feel even more so is to be critical or contemptuous of his sexual attractiveness or performance. For most human beings, self-esteem is inextricably linked with sexuality rather than with anything more rational, like intellectual achievement or goodness. Men, particularly, for obvious anatomical and physiological reasons, are vulnerable to disparagement. I do not know how many murders of women by men are the consequence of the victim taunting the murderer with his sexual inadequacy, but the number cannot be small.

The relation between sexuality and violence is one which I believe to be often misunderstood. Although violence may be the consequence of sexual frustration, violence itself seldom brings sexual fulfilment in a direct sense. There are, of course exceptions; Gilles de Rais, the mediaeval child-murderer, and Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, perpetrators of the 'Moors Murders' in Britain in the 1960's, are examples of persons in whom sexual satisfaction and murder appear to go hand in hand. But very few murders are 'lust murders'. The Kinsey team, in their book on *Sex Offenders,* write: "Child murders in connection with sexual activity receive great publicity which gives the impression that they are not infrequent; actually they are extremely rare. . . . The murder of a child as an integral part of sexual gratification is a one-in-a-million phenomenon. We discovered no such murders, but a few of the aggressors vs. children whom we interviewed had inflicted injuries that might easily have led to death."[11] And Mohr, Turner and Jerry, in their study of *Pedophilia and Exhibitionism,* write: "Although homicide of children resulting from pedophilic offences does occur, it is so rare that pedophilic offenders cannot be considered more homicidal than any other population group."[12]

In my view, human cruelty is not primarily a sexual phenomenon. The riot police wielding their clubs may become exhilarated by this manifestation of their power, but I do not believe they have erections whilst engaged in this activity. Torturers may certainly gain gratification from the torments they inflict upon their helpless victims, but this gratification is surely one of revenge; exhilaration at having a previously feared enemy at their mercy, and pleasure in retaliation for real or

imagined injuries. I am not disputing the fact that men who are conscious of exercising power, even at the despicable level of inflicting pain upon others, may then become more confident in their potency in other situations, including the sexual. A certain amount of confidence is essential, especially for males, before sexual intercourse can be engaged in satisfactorily.

> Persons who require the assistance of sado-masochistic phantasies, or who actually have to engage in sadistic activities before they can perform the sexual act, are persons who have no such confidence. Essentially, they believe themselves to be weak and helpless children, and other people to be grown-up and much more powerful; a belief which persists emotionally in spite of actual evidence to the contrary. Their sado-masochistic preoccupations reflect a failure to achieve an established place in a real and actual hierarchical structure with other human beings; a step which appears to be an essential prerequisite to becoming capable of a true love involvement. Although there are a few psychopathic people who act out their sadistic phantasies, by far the majority of patients who consult a psychiatrist on account of such phantasies are, in real life, passive, ingratiating, and fearful of women. Their phantasy life, split off from reality, contains in exaggerated and distorted form the active and dominant aspects of their masculinity which have been repressed and dissociated.[13]

The fact that about 80 percent of pornographic literature is sado-masochistic and that very large numbers of human beings show some interest in such writings, attests how widespread are feelings of male inadequacy. Indeed, such feelings can, without too much difficulty, be disinterred from the inner recesses of the minds of most of us. Violence, in many instances, seems to be a response to the activation of feelings of inadequacy and helplessness; and such feelings are an inevitable part of infancy and childhood, which none entirely escape. We are status-seeking creatures whose belief in our own status is easily overthrown and demands constant reinforcement. Most of us gain that reinforcement from the love and esteem of our fellows. But those who have never felt themselves to have had such love and esteem, or who cannot believe in its reality when proffered, easily resort to violence; and it is not surprising that the place where such violence most often makes itself manifest is within the family.

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12. Mohr, J.W.; Turner, R.E.; and Jerry, M.B., *Pedophilia and Exhibitionism.* Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1964, p. 76.
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PART ONE

FAMILY VIOLENCE - PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES

In his introduction to this volume, Dr. Anthony Storr draws attention to the normality of aggression. "If even a small child", he writes, "never showed any aggression toward those who protect, and therefore restrict it, we should rightly suppose that there was something essential missing from its make-up". Yet there comes a stage when natural aggressive instincts become pathological, when rough and tumble becomes sadistic, when self-assertion turns into violence. The borderline between acceptable, even desirable aggressive manifestations and those we stigmatize as 'violent' is not one which can be objectively established. The social acceptability of violence varies between cultures, within cultures and across time. The researcher into family violence is therefore forced to establish his own working criteria for identification of violence. In a paper published in 1975[1] Dr. Richard Gelles showed how important it was, in the area of child abuse, to examine "who does the public labelling of abuse, what definitions or standards are employed, under what conditions are labels successfully applied, and what are the consequences of the labelling process." The significance for social policy of the professional images of child abuse is further explored by Drs. Eli Newberger and Richard Bourne in Chapter 10 of this volume.

Differing perceptions as to what types of conduct constitute 'violence' (including family violence) is significant in theoretical discussion and partly accounts for the widely varying types of explanation given for it. Many of these theories are explored by Mr. Michael Freeman in the first part of Chapter 5. The major theories may be broken down, as Dr. Mary Lystad[2] does, into three groups. There are those which explain unacceptable violence in terms of psychological variables operating diversely on individuals. Dr. Storr's references in the Introduction to individual experiences of helplessness and humiliation and Dr. Richard Makman's account, in Chapter 3, of the prevalence of the related experiences of rejection and loss by persons known to have performed acts of abnormal violence provide further insight into the psychological aetiology of violence. Other explanations have looked to social variables, whether of cultural (class) or economic origin and have often seen the seeds of violence in the functioning of family life in the modern world. Many of these factors are considered by Professor Murray A. Straus in Chapter 2. It is also possible to look more widely across modern society and seek the causes of family violence in its fundamental cultural assumptions and