FAMILY VIOLENCE FROM A COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

Edited by
Dudley D. Cahn & Sally A. Lloyd

FAMILY VIOLENCE FROM A COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

Edited by
Dudley D. Cahn & Sally A. Lloyd

SAGE Publications
International Educational and Professional Publisher
Thousand Oaks London New Delhi

For information address:

SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Family violence from a communication perspective / editors, Dudley D. Cahn, Sally A. Lloyd.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-8039-5982-6 (cloth: acid-free paper).—ISBN 0-8039-5983-4 (pbk.: acid-free paper)
1. Family violence—United States. 2. Communication in the family—United States. 3. Wife abuse—United States. 4. Child abuse—United States. 5. Dating violence—United States. I. Cahn, Dudley D. II. Lloyd, Sally A.
HQ809.3.U5F343 1996
362.82'92—dc20 95-50233

This book is printed on acid-free paper.
96 97 98 99 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Sage Production Editor: Tricia K. Bennett Sage Typesetter: Marion Warren

FAMILY VIOLENCE FROM A COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

Preface

Violence is alarmingly prevalent in today's American family. If one focuses on physical violence, a number of studies report startling findings. Sugarman and Hotaling (1989a) averaged the results of studies on premarital violence, revealing a prevalence rate of 30%. Straus and Gelles (1990) reported that physical violence occurred in one of every six marriages. Estimates of physical violence by a parent against his or her children range from 3.5 to 24 cases per 1,000 children (Lloyd & Emery, 1993). Perhaps one should not overlook the fact that 6% of all police officers who died in the line of duty between 1972 and 1984 were killed while dealing with domestic violence cases.

Another form of violence—sexual abuse—exists in the family and premarital relationships as well. Fifty to 75% of women report some type of sexual aggression in their dating relationships (Lloyd & Emery, 1993). Finkelhor and Yllö (1985) reported marital rape of 10% of women in intact couples and 25% of women in divorced couples. Using a random national sample, Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, and Smith (1990) observed that over 6% of women and nearly 2% of men had experienced childhood sexual abuse.

Other forms of violence—verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse—likely occur more often than physical violence (Marshall, 1994). Sugarman and Hotaling (1989a) reported that over 75% of the people in their study had expressed threats of violence to their partners. In a

recent study of students, 77% of males and 76% of females had expressed threats of violence to their partners, and 72% of males and 79% of females had received threats from their partners (Marshall, 1994).

Because of the extent of family and premarital violence in the United States, the subject is increasingly receiving the interest of family theorists and researchers. Much of the research in the past has concentrated on the personality factors and characteristics of aggressors and their victims. Lloyd and Emery (1994) have noted that recent work indicates that communication factors are better at differentiating relationships that are abusive from nonabusive relationships. Today, more researchers are attempting to investigate the communicative factors associated with family violence, to clarify some of the interrelationships among the different types of communication and different types of family violence, and to discuss the implications of current communication research on family violence for theorists and practitioners. In this vein, *Family Violence From a Communication Perspective* is designed to make several contributions to the domestic violence and family abuse literature.

First, this book presents a communication perspective on family violence. Other perspectives of violence and abuse appear to focus on behaviors that inflict physical or psychological pain, injury, or suffering or both on another person. From a communication perspective, these behaviors are redefined as acts or actions with intention (from a message sender's point of view) or with perceived intention (from a message receiver's point of view). In addition, these acts or actions may be verbal (words) or nonverbal (symbolic actions besides words) or both. A communication perspective is useful for examining abusive family relationships because verbal and nonverbal communication is the essence of an interpersonal relationship. Communication is the tool partners use to create, perpetuate, and redefine their relationship.

Second, this book is multidisciplinary in that it includes contributions from the disciplines of communication studies, family studies, sociology, and psychology. The contributors include teachers of family communication and related college courses, interpersonal conflict and violence researchers, and family therapists. They represent the north, south, east, west, and middle of the United States. Some chapters present more traditional or quantitative views of the subject whereas others take

a qualitative approach. The strength of this book lies in its diversity. Taken together, these chapters present an emerging communication perspective on family and premarital physical violence, sexual abuse, and verbal aggression.

Third, this book takes a developmental view of violence in the family—beginning with courtship violence, proceeding through marital violence, and ending in parent-child violence. Some of the chapters interrelate these subjects in interesting ways to show how violence at one stage leads to violence at other stages of family development. Although more communication-oriented research has been done on marital violence, in this book an attempt has been made to take a more balanced approach by including courtship and parent-child physical, sexual, and verbal abuse.

Fourth, although *Family Violence From a Communication Perspective* reports numerous research findings, discusses some methodological issues, and relates empirical findings to theory, it also attempts to offer practical applications of research, especially in family therapy. Practitioners will find a number of useful insights that should be valuable in their daily work with perpetrators and victims as well as with parents and children in abusive families. Although therapists may find this book to be useful, researchers and theorists will benefit from a fruitful and comprehensive treatment of the subject.

Finally, this book consists of some chapters that summarize existing studies to emphasize principles that underlie family violence and other chapters that report the results and analyze data to break new ground. Reviews of family violence in general as well as specialized topics like coercion, power, and control in abusive families and marital and parent-child verbal aggression create a foundation for generating future hypotheses. Meanwhile, specific research reports on dating violence, processes of seduction and entrapment in violent dating relationships, negative and positive interaction in abusive marriages, parents' relationship to adolescent sex offenders, patterns of relational control in violent marriages, and the link between parental interaction and parent-child interaction in abusive families extend existing research into new territory.

Acknowledgments

We thank our contributing authors without whom this book would not exist. They devoted a great deal of time from their busy schedules to meet deadlines, revise, and meet new deadlines as they tried to apply their knowledge and expertise to the study of violent families. We also express our appreciation to the loved ones of the contributing authors and the editors for their patience, understanding, help, and emotional support as we worked together to bring our efforts to a close.

Contents

1

Family Violence From a Communication Perspective

DUDLEY D. CAHN

This chapter reviews recent studies on courtship, marital, and parent-child violence that illustrate a communication approach. Family violence refers to physical violence, sexual abuse, and verbal aggression by a family member (or prospective family member—e.g., a date) who does physical or psychological, emotional, or mental harm or both to another. In this chapter, family violence is related to the three primary dimensions of communication: instrumental, relational, and identify.

Although violent behavior is probably as old as civilization, most recently family violence took center stage in the media with the much televised trial of O. J. Simpson, once a professional football star, famous Hertz rental car promoter, and handsome TV sports announcer. He stood accused of knifing to death his attractive ex-wife, Nicole, and a man outside her residence, following her decision to move from the West coast to the East. Although O. J. Simpson was later declared not guilty by the jury, bits and pieces of information publicized during the trial painted a picture of an abusive husband. Tape recordings allegedly showed a hysterical Nicole Simpson screaming for help as O. J. Simpson beat down the door to get at her. Records showed her attempts to get police protection, and neighbors reported prior incidents of wife beating. A woman who was allegedly a member of Nicole's therapeutic support group described on television how Nicole was beaten, blamed herself, tried to hold the marriage together, and continued to love O. J.

Infante, Chandler, and Rudd (1989) claim that "when violence occurs it is not an isolated event in [spouses'] lives, but is embedded firmly in the process of interpersonal communication which people use to regulate their daily lives" (p. 174). However, much of the research on family abuse in the past has treated violence as an isolated form of behavior by concentrating on describing the personality factors and social characteristics of both the abusers and their victims (Lloyd & Emery, 1994). This past research fails to place violent behavior within broader and more extended sequences of human interaction. Lloyd and Emery point out that such noncommunication-oriented research is a relatively poor predictor of domestic violence compared to communication research.

In addition to setting the scene for the chapters that follow, the purpose of this chapter is to describe a communication perspective on domestic violence research, to suggest a direction for future research, and to frame the literature in a way that is useful for family therapists who must create ways to help abusers and victims. Before describing a communication perspective, a few points must be made about family violence.

For the purposes of this chapter, family violence includes physical violence, sexual abuse, and verbal aggression. As a first step to combating family violence, it is important to have definitions of these terms to clarify the difference between normal or acceptable types of behavior and violations. Physical violence is defined by Straus and Gelles (1990) as "an act carried out with the intention, or the perceived intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person" (p. 467). Gelles and Conte (1990) define child sexual abuse as "forced, tricked, or coerced sexual behavior between a young person and an older person" (p. 1050). When applied to courtship, Sugarman and Hotaling (1989a) define abuse as "the penetration or threat of an act of violence by at least one member of an unmarried dyad on the other within the context of the dating process" (p. 5). Verbal aggression is defined by Infante et al. (1989) as a verbal attack that "attempts to inflict psychological pain, thereby resulting in the (other's) feeling less favorable about self, i.e., suffering self-concept damage" (p. 164). Verbal aggression often plays a role in conflict that gets out of hand. In actuality, physical, sexual, and verbal abuse often occur together, sequentially, or simultaneously.

It is also important to better understand who are the abusers and the victims of abuse. Research shows that men are more likely to be the perpetrators of violence toward their female partners who are more likely to be the victims. Bograd (1990) reports that "wives suffer significantly more physical injuries than do husbands" (p. 133). According to Marshall (1994), males are more likely to hit or kick a wall, door, or furniture; drive dangerously; act like a bully; hold and pin; shake or roughly handle; grab; and twist an arm, whereas more females sustain these acts. As Dobash and Dobash state (1988), "certainly, there is a vast body of evidence confirming the existence of persistent, systematic, severe, and intimidating force men use against their wives . . . [that] does warrant the use of terms such as *wife beating* or *battered woman*" (p. 60). More than half of all women homicide victims are killed by former or current boyfriends or husbands, usually after they are separated (Walker, 1989). Research shows that women and children are more likely than male partners and fathers to be harmed by physical force in the family (Marshall, 1994).

Using a social exchange model, Margolin (1992) frames abuse into a phenomenon of gender. Noting that abusers are more likely to use violence in the home, where they expect the costs of abuse to be less than the rewards, Margolin argues that women suffer greater penalties than do men for domestic violence. If abusive behavior is more "costly" to women, men are more likely than women to beat or abuse their partners and children who love them. Furthermore, if violence committed by men is more likely to avoid sanctions, such as police intervention, loss of status, and public humiliation, men's violence toward family members is less subject to social control. Finally, due to their greater size and economic-social status, men may abuse family members "with less fear of reprisal." When one combines the privacy of the home with the lack of stigma, lack of social sanctions, and lack of social control, the costs of a man's being violent are less than the rewards.

Also, for the purposes of this chapter, family violence includes courtship, marriage, and child abuse. At first glance, it would seem that these topics are quite different subjects and are in fact often treated in separate articles and books. The different types of family violence, however, may be more interrelated than their definitions imply. For example, courtship violence is important because the origin of spouse abuse in many cases may be traced to courtship patterns that are also

abusive. When physical abuse between husband and wife is present, the risk of physical abuse of the child is increased by as much as 150% (Straus & Smith, 1990). Moreover, sons who observe their father's violence are 10 times more likely to engage in wife abuse in later marriage than are boys from nonabusive parents (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). According to Williams and Finkelhor (1990), approximately one in five parents abused as children are sexually abusive to their own children. The relationship between courtship, spouse, and child abuse may be due to the fact that they share common features unique to the family in which members experience high levels of emotional involvement and spend a lot of time in face-to-face contact (Burgess, Anderson, Schellenbach, & Conger, 1981). As early as the 1970s, some researchers emphasized the similarities in patterns, causes, and remedies between child abuse and other forms of family violence (Breines & Gordon, 1983).

Having made a few introductory comments about family violence, I will describe what I mean by a communication perspective. I will also explain what it means to take a communication perspective on domestic violence research.

A Communication Perspective on Domestic Violence

A common way to view communication is as a process of sending and receiving messages. Some communication studies focus primarily on the sending or encoding of messages and how people in certain situations tend to engage in certain kinds of message behaviors. These studies raise questions related to goals, purposes, and intentions of message senders. Other studies examine the decoding of messages and how people are likely to respond to messages. These studies raise questions related to the effects of messages in receivers.

Some communication scholars (e.g., Clark & Delia, 1979) argue that communicators produce messages to attain one or more of the following three goals: (a) instrumental goals that concern solving problems or accomplishing tasks, (b) relationship goals that concern creating and preserving a particular relationship between interactants, and (c) identity goals that concern establishing or maintaining a desired image of the communicator with others. Concomitantly, Benoit and Cahn

(1994) point out that a message has potential effects on receivers in these three same areas whether intended or not by message senders. The instrumental, relationship, and identity goals or effects may be considered as dimensions of communication, each varying from more to less.

By focusing on these dimensions of communication rather than simply the goals (sender's orientation) or the effects (receiver's orientation), researchers view the interaction between communicators as joint ventures (i.e., human actions) and meaning as jointly created. Presumably, humans construct their reality and coordinate their actions by intentionally (or perceived as intentionally) using verbal and nonverbal symbols whose meanings are shared by others. Symbols arouse meanings according to commonly shared conventions (e.g., rules, norms, and customs). Verbal and nonverbal communication is regulated by these social conventions that vary from one culture to another and that govern what is appropriate, expected, permissible, or prohibited in specific social contexts. *Communication competence* refers to the ability to appropriately and effectively use verbal and nonverbal symbols within a given speech community (e.g., culture). Appropriate communication avoids the violation of valued social conventions, whereas effective communication obtains valued goals or effects (Spitzberg, Canary, & Cupach, 1994). A communication approach views abusive and violent acts as the dark side of communication and the abusers and violators as communicatively incompetent (Lloyd, 1991).

A communication perspective is useful for examining family relationships because "interaction is the sine qua non of relationships; it is through communicative action that persons initiate, define, maintain, and terminate their social bonds" (Baxter, 1985, p. 245). Given a communication perspective, what are the interpersonal dynamics—the patterns of interaction—that typify abusive family relationships? In the remainder of this chapter, I will define violence from a communication perspective, review recent studies on family violence that take a communication perspective, and relate them to the three primary dimensions of communication.

Defining Violence and Abuse From a Communication Perspective

Many definitions of violence and abuse appear to focus on behaviors that inflict physical or psychological pain, injury, or suffering or

both on another person. From a communication perspective, these behaviors are redefined as acts or actions with intention (from a message sender's point of view) or with perceived intention (from a message receiver's point of view). In addition, these acts or actions may be verbal (words) or nonverbal (symbolic actions besides words) or both. Moreover, because violence appears to involve elements or power and control, a definition of violence should include the ability to impose one's will (i.e., wants, needs, or desires) on another person.

Finally, in most definitions of violence, the question of degree, type, and appropriateness arises. For example, when are parental discipline and punishment abusive? Some argue that physical violence is never justified even if it is effective (gets intended results); there are always better ways to solve problems if one takes the time to consider options and makes the effort to use nonviolent alternatives. At the other extreme, others respond automatically to violent behavior with no thought to alternatives simply because it gets results. Finally, somewhere in the middle are those who believe that one might resort to violence in situations of self-defense and the prevention of abuse. At least some effort should be made to determine which behaviors are appropriate and which ones violate socially acceptable standards.

In summary, violence or abuse may be defined as the ability to impose one's will (i.e., wants, needs, or desires) on another person through the use of verbal or nonverbal acts, or both, done in a way that violates socially acceptable standards and carried out with the intention or the perceived intention of inflicting physical or psychological pain, injury, or suffering, or both. The range of abusive behaviors includes mild forms of verbal intimidation, severe beatings, and extremely violent rapes and homicides. Violence ranges from carefully planned attacks to sudden emotional outbursts inflicting injury on other persons.

The description of a communication perspective on domestic violence includes the goals and effects of message behaviors that are intended or perceived as intended. These goals or effects represent the dimensions of communication. The next section considers how these dimensions may be applied to the study of domestic violence.

Violence and the Dimensions of Communication

When applied to the subject of family violence, the three dimensions of communication—instrumental, relational, and identity—provide an alternative view from the traditional study of the subject. Typically, research on family violence distinguishes between instrumental and expressive behaviors (Breines & Gordon, 1983; Finkelhor, 1983). Although the instrumental dimension clearly appears to be purposive and functional, the expressive category becomes a catchall for more than one type of noninstrumental behavior. In addition to the instrumental dimension, communication researchers are finding it useful to distinguish two additional categories of abusive behaviors—relationship and identity—depending on the abuser's goals or effects of the behaviors or both. Such a view reveals how communication functions differently in abusive and nonabusive families.

Family Violence as the Instrumental Dimension of Communication

The instrumental dimension of family violence is task accomplishing, goal attaining, or issue resolving. Among the types of behavior (on the part of victims) that supposedly precipitate violence, the only discernible pattern is that the behavior represents the victim's failure or refusal to comply with an abuser's wishes. Of course, there are many ways to get others to cooperate, so why do abusers resort to physical and sexual aggression?

Violence may occur in the family because one cannot easily walk away from disagreeable others. In contemporary American society, attempts to leave one's spouse or young children may be met with harsh social sanctions. Even breaking off living together arrangements may be complicated for some romantically involved but unmarried couples. Unable to break off easily from companionate, marital, and familial obligations, individuals may become frustrated, angry, and resentful. According to the frustration-aggression hypothesis, when goal attainment is blocked frustration increases and, as a result, persons become more aggressive, increasingly more threatening, and eventually violent (DeTurck, 1987).