

# **The Interaction of Social and Psychosocial Factors in the Development of Violence: Reformulation of Theory Examining a Sample of African American Youth**

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## Statement of the Research Problem

The prevalence of youth violence is astonishing. National youth self-report data indicate that 6 of every 10 youths report some form of violent behavior (Thornberry et al., 1995). As the juvenile population is expected to grow, so is the rate of juvenile violence. It is estimated that among youths violent crime arrests will double by the year 2010 and arrests for murder are expected to increase by 45% (Snyder & Sickmund, 1995). The problem for African American youths is more pervasive. Although African American juveniles make up approximately 15% of the juvenile population, they were involved in 28% of arrests, and they were disproportionately represented in arrests for offenses such as murder (58%) and robbery (60%) (Sickmund et al., 1997). It is estimated that fewer black youths than white youths actually commit violence, black youths are almost twice as likely to continue violence into young adulthood once initiated (Elliott, 1994). These figures are indicative of a serious dilemma facing our nation and its adolescent population creating a further need to fully explain the mechanisms involved in violence development. Many theoretical assertions lack the depth needed to independently explain the intricacies involved and few empirical efforts have looked at the full spectrum of potential influence. Until increased efforts are made to provide cohesiveness to link the available knowledge, gaps will exist in our understanding of how to effectively deter youth violence.

## Research Background Questions/Hypotheses

This study utilizes a social systems theoretical perspective that addresses each domain of the social environment and its influence on youth violence simultaneously. The study relies on existing theoretical knowledge for within domain association of factors and on the social systems perspective for across domain association of factors. Based on this perspective factors are systematically aligned based on the social domain in which they exist. The macrosocial domain incorporates factors such as socialization based on race, class or gender. The mesosocial domain examines neighborhood level characteristics and the microsocial domain involves the relationships youths have with their families and peers and the influence these relationships have in facilitating behavior. The psychosocial domain involves youths' vulnerability to violent behavior in terms of their attitudes toward violence and violence acceptance within their immediate environments and in society. The logical sequence of the social domains implies that those factors that exist closest to the internal decision-making processes of the youth would have the most significant influence on the youth's behavior and perhaps moderate the influence of other factors.

Two research questions are posited for the study. 1) Does the ecological sequencing of social factors reflect the statistical influence of these factors on violence? 2) Do factors at the psychosocial level serve to mediate or convey the influence of other social factors on violence?

### Methodology

Design. The study uses data collected during the fourth year of a longitudinal research project evaluating the academic aspirations of African American high school students. Students were interviewed each year for 4 consecutive years on such factors as intention and determination to complete high and potential obstacles to school completion. The students were recruited annually through their guidance counselor who served as project liaison. Each student who volunteered for the study received \$15. The administration of the instrument took approximately 60 minutes. To control for possible experimentation bias, African American graduate students conducted all interviews.

Sample. The sample is comprised of 200 African American youths who are 60% female and 40% male. The sample range in age from 15 to 20 being a mean age of 17.5 (std = 6.4) years. Eighty-eight percent (n=175) of the sample were enrolled in the targeted high school at the time of the fourth year interview. Those not enrolled included 3% who had dropped out and 10% who had transferred to other local high schools.

Measures. Standardized items from the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children (Schaffer et al., 1995) and the National Youth Survey (Elliot et al., 1985) measure violence for the outcome domain. A dichotomous measure of gender and a generic measure of economic well being assess the macrosocial domain. At the mesosocial level a measure of youth exposures to very upsetting events was taken from a modified from the PTSD section of the Diagnostic Interview Schedule (DIS, Robins, 1985; Robins et al., 1981) and a neighborhood quality measure is also assessed. Measures at the microsocial domain examine what youths felt would gain the respect of their peers and youths' perceptions of their parents' attitudes toward violence. The psychosocial domain measures assess youths' attitudes toward violence and the motives or circumstances under which youths perceive they would use violence.

Analysis. Using the SAS/CALIS statistical program, the study examines hierarchical multiple regression models and structural equation models. Structural models include direct paths to violence from each domain and indirect paths to violence from the outermost domains by way of the psychosocial domain. Principal components factor analyses generate factor scores based on the constructs to be included in the models being tested. Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), Bentler's Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI), and Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) estimates determine model fit.

## Summary of Results

Results of hierarchical regression models confirm the association of factors included in the final structural model. The final structural model provides a good fit to the data (Chi-Square=7.03, df=4, p=.13; AGFI=.91; CFI=.99; NNFI=.95). There are three direct paths to violence, which accounts for 35% of the variance explained in the construct. The significant paths to violence are gender (-.19), traumatic exposures (.29), and motives (.38). The negative path from gender to violence indicates that when predictors of violence are considered conjointly, the acts of violence displayed by females increases. The direct path to violence from traumatic exposures indicates that when youths are exposed to a traumatic event, their use of violence is not mediated through their attitudes or motives. As anticipated, the motives construct (psychosocial domain) has the strongest path to violence. As youths' agreement with motive for violence increased, so too did their acts of violence. Factors with a significant path to motives for violence included parent attitude (.24), peer respect (.16) and youth attitude toward violence (.45). The stronger youths felt their parents' attitudes toward violence were, the more they agreed with motives toward the use of violence. Youths are also more likely to agree with motives toward violence if they felt violence was a method that could gain the respect of their peers. As expected, how strongly youths felt about the use of violence has a direct impact on whether or not they would use violence. The three direct paths to motives account for 49% of the variance in the construct. The influence of gender and traumatic exposures is neither mediated nor moderated by the psychosocial level.

## Utility for Social Work Practice

Though the strength of association of variables provide some indication that a social system hierarchy exists, when variables are considered conjointly, there appears to be many complex associations that influence violence and alter the strength of individual factor association. At the psychosocial level, social workers must seek to alter negative attitudes toward violence. In addition, social workers must help youths develop alternative ways to deal with situations that may provide them with motives for violence. Efforts should be made to incorporate positive psychosocial characteristics as protective factors. Prevention efforts that enhance the social and cognitive skills of youths have proven to have a positive effect on the youths' attitudes about violence behavior (American Psychological Association, 1993). Results specifically indicate that the psychosocial characteristics of youths do operate as a central 'intake' for factors that exist at the microsocial domain. That is, the influence that factors such as parental attitudes and peer influence have on violence is conveyed through youths' attitudes and motives. This indicates that youths are internally incorporating these experiences. Thus, effective social work practice must address the ways in which youths incorporate their socialization experiences. Social workers should also seek to help parents realize how youths' perceptions of their views of violence are impacting the youths' behaviors.

If youths are socialized into violence, and socialization is a lifelong process, practice efforts should focus on the impact of negative socialization. Once socialization

takes place it may be impossible to remove what's already there, thus social work must take an active role in the elimination of negative stereotypes and biases that exist within society. The direct relationship of traumatic exposure to violence and motives for the use of violence indicate that youths may not be able to cope with the stresses placed on them by experiences that provoke anger or insight revenge. Efforts at this level should address strengthening youths' coping mechanisms through anger management and stress reduction.

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