



How Does Exposure to Violence During Adolescence Impact Future Orientation?

Exposure to violence (ETV) is associated with poorer mental and physical health outcomes including mental distress, suicidal ideation, problematic behaviors, and substance abuse. Individuals with regular exposure to violence may be at higher risk of hopelessness and more likely to avoid consideration of the future in a positive way. Up to now, we haven't known exactly why or how ETV has been associated with negative outcomes, including lower future orientation.



Photograph by Danny Lyon, Public Domain

Having a future orientation has been associated with positive, pro-social outcomes. Future orientation consists of the thoughts, feelings, and plans, about one's life in years to come. It reflects hope, purpose, and expectations. When individuals behave in ways that reaffirm their expectations, future orientation is related to goal-directed behavior. For example, if everyone in your neighborhood is planning to attend college their first year after high school graduation, and you expect to do the same, you will prepare to take the necessary standardized tests needed for the college applications. On the other hand, if your expectation is greater involvement in street violence, your preparation may center on greater safety and protective measures.

Highlights

Exposure to violence impacts mental health and behavior, but we haven't known exactly why or how.

Schmidt, Zimmerman, and Stoddard posit that exposure to violence impacts future orientation through perceived stress.

Spending recreational time within families can buffer the negative impacts of violence exposure.

It makes sense that continued exposure to violence would increase survival-related anxiety, leaving less room for future orientation. On the other hand, future-oriented hope may be the most useful coping mechanism in violent situations. Interestingly, the literature reflects this confliction. Prior to this study, Brown and Gourdine (2001)¹, for example, found low levels of hope among African-American adolescent females who witnessed violence, while Hinton-Nelson, Roberts, and Snyder (1996)² found higher levels of hope in people that witnessed violence, and Ludwig and Warren (2009)³ found no relationship between exposure to violence and hopefulness.

“Although many researchers have examined parental support, family participation is an understudied family environment characteristic.”

(Schmidt, Zimmerman, and Stoddard, pg 10)

Methods

This study, described in [A Longitudinal Analysis of the Indirect Effect of Violence Exposure on Future Orientation Through Perceived Stress and the Buffering Effect of Family Participation](#), published in the [American Journal of Community Psychology](#), was the first to use longitudinal data to assess the impact of ETV and perceived stress on future orientation. Unlike, previous, cross-sectional designs, this study was able to examine stressors over multiple years, as well as assess the impact of family participation as a buffer to that stress. Data were collected as part of the [Flint Adolescent Study](#) in Flint, MI. The final sample size for this study was 316 African-American youth, collected from the time that they were in 9th grade until they were approximately 32 years old.

Results

- ETV increases perceived stress; stress which the participant understands is relevant and uncontrollable/unpredictable.
- ETV impacts future orientation through perceived stress.
- Perceived stress may leave adolescents without the emotional resources to consider their future.
- Family participation, or time spent in leisure and recreation with one’s family, may provide a buffering effect from ETV, and in some cases, may eliminate the negative influence of ETV on future orientation.

¹ Brown, A. W., & Gourdine, R. (2001). Black adolescent females: An examination of the impact of violence on their lives and perceptions of environmental supports. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 4(4), 275-298.

² Hinton-Nelson, M. D., Roberts, M. C., & Snyder, C. R. (1996). Early adolescents exposed to violence: Hope and vulnerability to victimization. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 66(3), 346-353.

³ Ludwig, K. A., & Warren, J. S. (2009). Community violence, school-related protective factors, and psychosocial outcomes in urban youth. *Psychology in the Schools*, 46(10), 1061-1073.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation— We know that ETV is associated with negative outcomes, but there are many possible ways in which ETV impacts the individual. Addressing community violence involves facing complex structural and individual factors for which violence reduction programs have made only moderate impacts. If we better understand exactly what causes the negative outcomes for individuals, we can promote effective protective factors and work to create opportunities for additional youth support, even as we work to end violence.

Practice—Strengthening families is key to break the cycles of intergenerational violence. This study found that the coping skills and modelling of pro-social stress reactions can reduce the impact of violence. The work suggests that designing programs to support more time for youth to spend with their families in recreational and supportive ways is important, particularly during adolescence.

Social Justice - Chronic exposure to violence can differentially impact low-income, urban, communities of color. As such, efforts to support families with opportunities for safe, fun, recreation can be quite meaningful.

Summary and Discussion by A. Simons-Rudolph. All omissions and errors are the responsibility of the author.

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