

# Inter generational theory of abuse psychology essay



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The inter-generational theory of abuse is a widely accepted notion by professionals and lay people alike. This theory suggests that children exposed to physical, emotional or sexual abuse will subject their offspring to a one of these forms of maltreatment. However, the evidence that undermines this theory is too large to ignore. The evidence that supports this hypothesis refers to abused children becoming juvenile delinquents and the identification of the child with the abuser. Methodological problems, generalizability issues and low validity of the experiments conducted undermined the plausibility and truth in the hypothesis. Another strong factor is the protective factors and predisposition of abused children, who break the cycle of abuse - which is more common than thought. In this essay I will discuss the evidence both for and against the hypothesis.

Kaufman and Zigler (1987) found that the papers written on studies of inter-generational abuse assert validity without proper evidence because their primary sources of information are unreliable. These studies rely largely on case studies, agency records, clinical interviews, self-report questionnaires. An example of case studies was those mostly done with parents whose children were in hospital for non-accidental injuries (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987). Most of these parents reported histories of abuse, but because there were methodological problems (such as limited control measures) the generalizability of the findings is not possible. Agency records also had many of the same limitations. The representative samples, comparison subjects and formal definitions of abuse differed. The omissions in agency records were rarely recorded. Clinical interviews are valuable for generating hypotheses about inter-generational theory but they lacked comparison

groups and definitions were far from legal criteria (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987). Self-report questionnaires lacked the exploration of the statistical relationships among determinants of abuse (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987). Egeland & Jacobvitz's observed that the history of abuse could not be separated from influence of poverty, stress and social isolation on parenting behavior. They also noted that the broader the definition is, the greater the apparent link becomes in the inter-generational hypothesis - thus make the validity of the collected data low (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987).

According to Langeland and Dijkstra (1995) the variations of definitions of abuse cause considerable variation of the rates of transmission. They concur that due to bad methodologies making generalizations from the information is problematic. They also highlight the need to study both mothers and fathers (because they have clinical and theoretical relevance), which isn't always the case. Langeland and Dijkstra (1995) show how many studies only examine one child (e. g. Goodwin et al., 1981; Main & Goldwyn, 1984; Altemeier et al., 1986; Egeland et al., 1988; Pianta et al., 1989; Burkett, 1991; Boyer & Fine, 1992; Caliso & Milner, 1992; Herzog et al. 1992; as cited in Langeland and Dijkstra; 1995) and suggest researchers need to look at wider family context (that is brothers, father, grandparents, aunts and cousins).

Widom (1989) highlights that the methodological problems play a role in the misrepresentation and overestimation of the actual statistics related to the inter-generational theory. In Widom's review of the literature, she also emphasizes the over dependence on self-report, inadequate documenting of childhood abuse, and the infrequent use of control groups. According to <https://assignbuster.com/inter-generational-theory-of-abuse-psychology-essay/>

Widom researchers should make a clearer distinction between abused and neglected children because the differences in consequences are significant – the information collected overlaps and distorts the results. Widom thus suggests the need for better rating scales for studies, and the need for a greater methodological awareness and refinement.

## **Protective Factors and Predispositions**

Kaufman and Zigler (1987) observed that some parents (with a history of abuse) became abusive parents whereas other did not. Hunter and Kilstrom (as cited in Kaufman & Zigler, 1987) attributed this to the individuals having: extensive social support (e. g. therapy); fewer undecided feelings about being pregnant, they were openly angry about the abuse they endured, and their babies were healthier. Another study by Egeland and Jacobvitz (as cited in Kaufman & Zigler, 1987) found mediating factors to be that one parent/foster parent was loving and caring towards the abused child, the abused had an emotionally supportive spouse, they also had fewer current stressful life events and they had a greater awareness of history of abuse and had come to terms with it. This study provides information on the interrelationships (etiology of abuse and other influences) of the many determinants of a parents behavior.

Langeland and Dijkstra (1995) also found that many abused children manage to break the cycle of inter-generational abuse. They emphasize the factors that protect/buffer the transmission. Belsky (1980, as cited in Langeland and Dijkstra, 1995) says there are multiple factors at work that cause abuse such as: the individual (personality of parents); familial (the home/family environment e. g. marital relationship); community (formal & informal social  
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structures e. g. neighborhood and other family); cultural (societal expectations and attitudes). However, Belsky (1980, as cited in Langeland and Dijkstra) says the interaction of risk and protective factors are important because they effect likelihood of transmission of abuse between generations.

Garbarino & Gilliam (1980, as cited in Widom, 1989) reiterates that other life events or the predisposition of the child (e. g. natural abilities, physiological predispositions, and social supports) will protect them from the effects of abuse.

## **Delinquency and Identification**

Kaufman and Zigler (1987) commented on the many other factors that contribute to abuse. Children may find themselves in similar social or relationship conditions (or have long lasting effects of child abuse) that led their parents to be abusive to them as children and cope in the same way.

Quinton and Rutter (1988) reiterate that abuse occurs for many reasons namely: substantial social and environmental hardships and a constellation of psycho-social difficulties. It is noted that children may have the same or similar situations as their parents and cycle continues because of the same outside influences. They found that abuse can lead to: personality disorders, alcoholism, and criminality - all of which are associated with abuse. Sir Keith Joseph (1972, as cited in Quinton and Rutter, 1988) said poor parenting is a central mechanism for encouraging inter-generational transmission of family problems (that is children learn from their parents).

Men that were imprisoned for violence against children were found to have come from large families where abuse was common (Gibbens & Walker, <https://assignbuster.com/inter-generational-theory-of-abuse-psychology-essay/>)

1956; Scott, 1973, as cited in Quinton and Rutter, 1988) and women accused with child-battering were associated with unhappy, loveless and traumatic childhoods (Lukiarowitz, 1971 as cited in Quinton and Rutter, 1988). Quinton and Rutter (1988) noted that the vulnerabilities deriving from exposure to poor parenting can lead to them being abusive (e. g. depression is known to be associated with abuse).

Widom (1989) emphasized that the immediate consequences of child abuse are physical injuries or emotional trauma but that the emotional and developmental scars may persist - thus leading to the likelihood of inter-generational transmission of abuse.

McCall & Shields (1986, as cited in Widom, 1989) highlighted the context of violence in culture. Accordingly the approval of such behaviors legitimizes and reinforces the use of violence (Gil, 1973; Huggius & Straus, 1980; Steinmetz, 1977; as cited in Widom, 1989) which in turn instigates the high degree of acceptance of violence in culture (R. A. Stark & McEvoy, 1970 as cited in Widom, 1989). It is therefore not too difficult to deduce that learning to become violent through 'normal' childrearing experiences might be transmitted from generation to generation (Goldstein, 1986; as cited in Widom, 1989). The social learning of a child and the witnessing/victims of physical and emotional aggression become a model for the child that violence is appropriate in the home (Bandura, 1973; Feshbach, 1980; as cited in Widom, 1989). Straus et al. (1980, as cited in Widom, 1989) suggest that each generation of abusive parents learns to be violent by being a participant in a violent home. Other evidence suggests that abuse leads to aggressive behavior, depression, withdrawal and self-punishing behavior - all

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of which lead to abusive behavior which would suggest that the cycle of abuse can be and is transmitted. It is also suggested that abuse may lead to becoming an abusive parent, a delinquent, or a violent criminal (Widom, 1989).

McCord (1983) did a study on abused, neglected, rejected, and loved boys. She found that 45% of the abused and neglected boys ended up being convicted for serious crimes, becoming alcoholics, suffering a mental illness, and/or died unusually young. Their parents were found to have been similar. Other researchers Rocklin and Lavett's (1987) research has demonstrated that identity formation (process by which a child incorporates aspects of a significant other) adds to inter-generational transmission. This is because they form these identifications as a coping mechanism rather than actual identity. However, the identification can persist and is often seen to be used later in life.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that being abused puts people at risk of being abusive towards their offspring but it is not the only factor and the path is not direct. There are many protective factors that buffer the adverse effects of abuse, which often breaks the cycle of abuse. The methodological limitations of most experiments (and lack of control measures) have lead to misleading representations of the statistics, and the inter-generational transmission of false facts (Widom, 1989). However the persistent acceptance of the inter-generational theory seems to have undermined many studies as well. The risk factors and society in which a child learns from seems to cause abuse and the transmission from generation to generation. In conclusion abuse is <https://assignbuster.com/inter-generational-theory-of-abuse-psychology-essay/>

not necessarily transmitted from generation to generation, because there are many protective factors and the path is not direct. The past and present influence the likelihood of abused children becoming abusive parents, not just the possibility of the inter-generational abuse occurring.