

Childhood exposure to family violence as a social work issue

Psychology, Child Development



This literature review will explore childhood exposure to family violence (CEFV) as a social work issue and in particular, it focuses on the intergenerational impact of CEFV on female adults' attitudes and behaviors towards family violence (FV).

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) plays an important part in promoting the wellbeing and protection of children affected by FV across the lifespan, because evidence has shown that a large proportion of children who were exposed to FV will 'themselves experience ill impacts of this violence over the course of their lives'. The AASW is also committed to the development of research to support better outcomes for children in a range of contexts, including FV and intergenerational trauma. It is worth noting that the AASW takes 'violence against women (VAW)' as an overarching issue among all forms of FV, as VAW is 'the most pervasive, yet least recognized' in the world. Especially, VAW reveals the gender inequities rooted in society which run counter to social justice — the core value of AASW Code of Ethics (2010). Thus, more concerns should be given to both children and the female who were exposed to FV.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 23% children under the age of 15 reported witnessing violence against their mother by a partner. Earlier data demonstrated that 61% women who had experienced FV reported having children in their care while the violence occurred (Australia's National Research Organization for Women's safety 2014). As the Royal Commission into Family Violence summarized, social workers have been playing a vital role in the development of child protection from FV since 1970s, when

homelessness services became part of FV services. For years, measures to address CEFV have been reflected in legislations. However, the statutory threshold restricts the access of some children exposed to FV to child protection services, resulting in a lack of targeted resources to support those children. Currently, although CEFV has been increasingly recognized as a form of child abuse, studies have found that CEFV is most likely to cause intergenerational transmission of violence (IGTV) compared with experiencing other forms of child abuse. Despite ample studies on IGTV, little is known about how the female exposed to FV in childhood perceive FV in Australia, on account of the much more significant and externalized demonstration of violence perpetrated by the male who were exposed to FV as children.

As a female adult who witnessed several times of violence against mother perpetrated by father in childhood, I was encouraged to research on this issue when I found my partner cautiously avoiding my slap as he noticed my annoyance at him. It appeared to me that such violent behavior in intimate relation was a normal way to vent my frustration. This perception of FV, as O'Leary stated (2017), was embedded within me before I am able to reflect on it. Since my initial view on FV derived from family of origin was also an inspiration for the Annotated Bibliography, I have realized there are alternative views on FV of women from various social and cultural backgrounds who were also exposed to FV in childhood. To conduct a credible research, I will continue to withhold judgments when taking in pluralistic opinions to manage subjectivities.

Literature Review

In this section, five relevant studies on the impact of CEFV on the female's attitudes and behaviors towards FV are presented, with two of them based in Australia and published within the last six years. Another three studies were undertaken in America, Canada and England respectively and published in the last ten years. Owing to the paucity of Australian literature, we can refer to comparable and developed social work researches in other western countries to facilitate our work. This section is organized to understand this issue from both structural and individual perspectives, which is structured into relation between CEFV and female FV, and female perceptions of FV to review these researches.

Relation between CEFV and Female FV

Three articles sought to examine the relation between CEFV and Adulthood FV. All of them adopted the positivist paradigm, which suggests that the relation objectively exists and can be discovered through scientific methods. In addition, two of them collected quantitative data through probability sampling, which ensures that the findings are most likely to apply to the target population. McKinney et al. (2009) conducted private face-to-face interviews with 1615 couples aged above 18 years old from the United States household population by utilizing a multistage cluster sampling. Godbout et al. (2009) recruited study participants in Quebec, Canada through both a survey firm which attracted an ultimate randomized pool of 553 couples by random-digit telephone dialing, and a range of media

advertisements with 91 individuals responding. However, in Abajobir et al.'s 2017 study, quantitative data was taken through purposive sampling from a birth cohort of young adults recruited by Mater Hospital-University of Queensland Study in Brisbane, Australia. The sample was limited to 3322 young adults who had partners and reported possible FV victimization, comprised of 55% females. When conducting these three studies, researchers adequately considered ethical issues including ethical recruitment and consensual disclosure. For example, McKinney et al. excluded 16 couples in their study due to the compromise of those couples' privacy.

Statistical analyses were carried out in these three studies, with differentiated measures of variables and diverse descriptions of data leading to slightly different findings. McKinney et al. categorized female FV as reciprocal violence and nonreciprocal female-to-male violence (FMV) and, employed multinomial logistic regression to study the prevalence by gender. Findings from this national population-based study showed that females exposed to FV in childhood were more than 1.5 times as likely to engage in reciprocal FV compared with females without CEFV and particularly, females exposed to interparental violence were at increased risk of perpetrating FMV. However, whether this relevance is independent from other factors such as the female's economic status and education background is overlooked. Another limitation is the lack of gender-specific and incident-specific information of interparental violence, that is, whether the violence was perpetrated by father or mother only and whether it was in self-defense.

Godbout et al.'s study adopted attachment theory as a conceptual framework, using structural equation modeling to reveal the relation between CEFV and female FV. Moreover, they categorized CEFV into childhood psychological (witnessing) and physical violence and, performed hierarchic regression analyses to investigate which categories were specifically associated with female negative attachment and female FV. As a result, witnessing FV in childhood was associated with female anxious attachment and female FV, while experiencing physical violence in childhood was only associated with female avoidant attachment. Notably, the findings explained that CEFV was linked to female having a male partner anxiously attached, which along with the female's own anxious attachment, would result in female FV. This study is cross-sectional from the theoretical perspective of adult attachment. But one major limitation is neglecting the specific genders of childhood psychological violence perpetrators.

In accordance with Abajobir et al.'s measures of substantiated childhood maltreatment, CEFV was recognized as a form of it. FV in participants' childhood had been assessed in a follow-up lasting for 14 years since the participants were born. In this study's context, four forms of FV victimization were generated as emotional FV, physical FV, harassment and severe combined abuse. Abajobir et al. combined bivariate and multivariable logistic regression models, as well as sensitivity analyses to examine the relation between CEFV and FV victimization. The findings demonstrated that CEFV was most likely to cause a combination of FV victimization for both genders among all forms of childhood maltreatment. Manifestly, this is a systematic

study aimed at more than one childhood predictor of adulthood FV.

Compared with the prior two studies, it is remarkable that the authors adopted substantiated child maltreatment cases from records of child protection and conducted a 14-year follow-up of FV, presenting an objective measurement of CEFV and avoiding biases or distortions from retrospective reports. Nonetheless, this Australia-based study disregards the gender structure of IGTV, which is a critical factor of this social work issue.

Female Perceptions of FV

The other two articles focused on individual attitudes towards FV of adults exposed to FV in childhood. Both of them utilized the interpretive paradigm, that is, concentrating on these adults' subjective experience and, involving these adults in 'exploring the social meaning' of their behavior and attitudes by absorbing and analyzing their values and biases. Instead of performing quantitative researches, these two groups of researchers both conducted in-depth interviews with small samples of participants on their experience of CEFV, in order to develop a qualitative understanding of IGTV. Prior to the commencement of these two researches, researchers took ethical principles into account adequately. Stanley, Miller and Foster (2012) obtained the young adults' informed consent to participating in their study. O'Brien et al. reminded the participants of their rights before the interview, including voluntary participation, de-identified data, comfortable feeling of answering and free withdraw.

In Stanley et al.'s study, 19 young adults aged 18-21 were recruited from voluntary and statutory organizations in England which offers support services for children exposed to FV, 11 of whom were female. These female participants were invited in focus groups where they had already been familiar with one another to talk freely and comfortably. The researchers used posters and scenarios to encourage these young adults to think about their experience of CEFV and reflect on their own attitudes towards FV. 8 out of 11 females witnessed father perpetrating violence against mother mostly. Although the extent of CEFV varied among the 8 females, some common perceptions of FV were identified. As a consequence of CEFV, these young ladies emphasized their anxious feelings and aggressive behaviors in family. Contrary to FV victimization like their mothers, they imitated their fathers to direct aggressive behaviors towards their partners or family members. Specifically, the researchers asked about their attitudes towards social workers who offered support for them, only to find that the appearance of social workers deepened their sense of powerlessness, since social workers were described as 'ineffective in the face of the perpetrator's violence'.

Stanley et al.'s qualitative research was undertaken in the view of social work, which is quite applicable to my topic. It identified FV as a gender-based behavior and explored the particular impact of childhood exposure to VAW on female's perception of FV. But there is a lack of study comparisons of CEFV between violence against mother and other forms of violence.

Additionally, the sample is restricted to young adults, which fails to represent most of female adults who have similar experience. As well, some important

indicators to define these 8 young ladies are ignored such as education background and effective early intervention.

In contrast, O'Brien et al. (2013) observed that some adaptive coping strategies could facilitate the resilience of female children who were exposed to FV and ameliorate these females' attitudes towards FV. The researchers recruited six Caucasian females aged 18-39 who witnessed FV in childhood through the advertisements on campus and at FV support services, also using snowball sampling which is helpful when potential participants are difficult to access through advertisements. With these females' ages, ethnicities, education backgrounds and economic status taken into consideration, O'Brien et al. employed a retrospective case study design and a resilience conceptual framework to explore these females' adaption to CEFV. Exploratory analyses of recorded narratives in the structured interviews revealed that, similar to most participants in Stanley et al.'s research, all participants were exposed to VAW mostly in childhood. However, these females who established a safe place and a supportive relationship outside the abusive family were encouraged to pursue a 'successful and rewarding' adult life free from any types of FV.

This Australia-based qualitative research is the only one to explore intergenerational impact of FV from the female-only perspective, because the authors believed that the female exposed to FV in childhood are often silenced. Although it provides a rationale for my research, this research has several limitations of its sampling so that it fails to represent the broader population, which is small size of sampling in a defined context and sampling

bias due to snowball sampling. Furthermore, the validity of this research remains unknown since it depended solely on subjective narratives of six ladies.

Summary and Reflection

Overall, the literature demonstrates that there is a significant relation between CEFV and FV perpetrated by the female from the population structure in most western countries. And the female witnessing interparental violence in childhood are most likely to perpetrate FV when they grow up. This phenomenon is explained by adult attachment theory that the female witnessing interparental violence in childhood is positively associated with both her own and her partner's anxious attachment towards each other, which in turn leads to female FV. However, whether interparental violence is gender-specific remains unknown. In addition, it is insightful that the female's individual perception of CEFV and FV can be ameliorated by her efforts of establishing a safe and supportive relationship out of the abusive family. But more researches are needed to validate this finding so that it can be transferrable to the broader population who share the similar experience. Hence, my research question is that 'examining whether intergenerational transmission of violence is gender-specific and can be ameliorated for the female witnessing family violence in childhood'.

A similar study conducted by Eriksson & Mazerolle (2015) is of instructional significance to my research. Namely, I will adopt both positivist and critical paradigms to perform this research, collecting quantitative data through

surveys of female clients in organizations of child protection and family violence services. The surveys are designed to empower those females to articulate their pains and gains from witnessing gender-specific FV. In this way, both the ‘ social’ and ‘ historical’ perspectives of my research question can be discovered.