Understanding How Children Experience and Interpret Violence in Two Cultures
Report of December 2013 Visit to Cape Town
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Project Summary

Nancy Shields, Kathy Nadasen and Lois Pierce have been collaborating on research on violence in South Africa and the U.S. since 2006. Several papers have been published based on this work. A recent paper, which has been published the journal *International Perspectives in Psychology*, is in many ways a culmination of much of the research. It focuses on a comparison of the psychological impact of various kinds of exposure to violence among young children ages 7-13 in Cape Town, South Africa and St. Louis, Missouri. A major finding of the paper is that while children in Cape Town were exposed to much more violence, children in St. Louis were experiencing more psychological distress. At first this seems counter intuitive as it seems logical that exposure to more violence would always lead to more psychological distress. The finding points to the importance of understanding how the impact of violence is moderated by cultural factors and is not the same in all cultures (Bond & Van De Vijver, 2011). Additional findings were:

- Victimization in the neighborhood was more strongly related to psychological distress in the U.S. sample, both at high and low levels of victimization.
- Children in the U.S. sample who had been exposed to low levels of violence in the school were more distressed than their counterparts in the South Africa sample.
- Children in the South Africa sample were more distressed at high compared with low levels of witnessed school violence.
- Younger children in the U.S. sample and older children in the South Africa sample were more affected psychologically by exposure to school violence.

Our main interpretation of the findings was based on the hypothesis that when violence is more “normative” in the sense that it is more common, it has a weaker impact on psychological distress. This interpretation is consistent with findings from two other studies on children exposed to violence. Of particular interest in this regard is a study by Seedat, Nyamai, Njenga, Vythilingum and Stein (2004) that compared the effects of trauma exposure on very large samples of children in Cape Town, South Africa (N = 1,140) and Nairobi, Kenya (N = 901). Even though the adolescents in the Kenya sample had witnessed more violence and had personally experienced more physical and sexual assault, the children in the South African sample reported much higher rates of full-symptom post-traumatic stress disorder. Seedat, et al. (2004) suggest several possible explanations for this finding: cultural differences in reactions to measurement instruments; higher exposure to chronic violent crime in South Africa (although this was not measured); and importantly, cultural differences in reactions to trauma. In light of our findings, the last interpretation seems most plausible. Another related cross-cultural study by Lansford, et al. (2005) examined cultural normativeness of physical discipline as a moderator of the effects of physical discipline on adjustment problems in children. Data were collected from mother/child dyads in China, India, Italy, Kenya, the Philippines, and Thailand. They
found that in countries where the use of physical violence was more common and accepted, the impact of physical discipline on negative behavioral outcomes was lower.

In the process of analyzing our data, we became aware of a need for more data on how children experience and interpret violence in these two different cultures. Some of the questions that emerged from the analysis were:

- How common the children think violence is in the family, school and community.
- What the children think about why people use violence.
- How acceptable they think the use of violence is.
- If they think the use of violence is different for different racial groups.
- What they know about apartheid from school and family and their perceptions of it.

Cape Town Visit

In December of 2013, Nancy Shields of the Department of Anthropology, Sociology and Languages of the University of Missouri-St. Louis visited the townships of Cape Town conduct open-ended interviews (with Kathy Nadasen of the University of the Western Cape) with ten children in Cape Town that addressed the five questions above. The children were living in the Elsies Rivier area. The qualitative data from the interviews will be used to develop a structured interview schedule about beliefs about the normativeness of violence and why it occurs. The structured interview would be pretested with children in St. Louis and Cape Town in the next phase of the project and ultimately data would be collected on a larger sample of about 150 children in both locations.

Additional data collection

The visit also provided us with the opportunity to pretest a standardized questionnaire we have developed to collect data on the impact of school violence on teachers in Cape Town townships and St. Louis. In August of 2011 Kathy Nadasen, Nancy Shields and Christine Hanneke (an additional collaborator) conducted four focus groups and one in-depth interview with seventeen secondary school educators. The purpose was to identify how educators are socially and psychologically affected by school violence. Some of the major themes that emerged were: (1) feeling blamed by others; (2) self-blame; (3) social isolation; (4) fear; (5) anger; (6) frustration; and (7) depression. A paper based on these data has been written and accepted by The Journal of Applied Social Science. A questionnaire based on these and other themes that were identified was developed. Kathy Nadasen and Nancy Shields pretested the questionnaire with ten secondary educators at Voorburg Secondary School during the same visit.
References

