Book Review

*The Impact of Family Violence on Children and Adolescents*, by Javad H. Kashani and Wesley D. Allan

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Published as part of the Sage series of developmental clinical psychology and psychiatry, the volume *The impact of family violence on children and adolescents* by Javad H. Kashani and Wesley D. Allan provides a brief overview of the main ideas and findings of this vast field. The size of this area of research can easily be illustrated. Using any combination of the search terms of ‘family violence’ or ‘domestic violence,’ on the one hand, and ‘children’ or ‘adolescents,’ on the other, the popular search engine PsycInfo produced almost 1300 unique references. Hence, writing a synopsis of this field in less than a 100 pages understandably represents a challenge.

Yet, Kashani and Allan are quite successful. Rather than actually providing a review of the most recent research—the task issued to them by the Sage series editor Alan Kazdin in his series introduction—their strategy is to focus more on the main conceptual issues of the field. Thus, the reader will acquire a very good sense not only of how family violence affects youth, but also with an idea about the main problems that this research area faces, including challenges to clinical assessment and treatment. Vignettes of prototypical cases often help to elucidate the nature and complexity of family violence impact. Thus, although five years old, in its succinctness and clarity the book is still helpful to the novice of 2003.
However, given that research has been proliferating, advanced students of the field may miss out on the more recent advances and analyses. Approximately half of the almost 1300 references mentioned above were published between 1998 and the writing of this review (spring 2003), after the publication Kashani and Allan’s volume. The fact that this newer literature could not be included is obviously unimportant in areas where theorizing has been stagnant, but it is a problem where there has been progress, for example, with regard to how exposure to violence affects emotions and emotion regulation (for example, Maughan and Cicchetti 2002). But even without theoretical breakthroughs, only post-1998 have there been a number of important meta-analyses (for example, Archer 2000; Kitzmann et al. 2003; Stith et al. 2000), which offer broad and solid statistical generalizations where previously there was only a sea of individual research studies of varying quality as well as qualitative reviews. Unfortunately, it is unclear whether the authors would have cited these meta-analyses, had they had the opportunity to do so. As it is, Kashani and Allan’s book does not make reference to any statistical synthesis—however pertinent to their topic— even if those were available prior to 1998 (for example, Depner et al. 1992; Sugarman and Frankel 1996).

The book includes ten chapters, spanning a wide range of subfields in clinical psychology, social work and psychiatry. The first chapter provides a definition of violence in families, as well as a brief discussion of sometimes-equivocal definitions used in the literature. Various perspectives on the etiology of family violence are reviewed in the second chapter, including biological perspectives (referring to physiological perspectives); the intergenerational transmission of violence; parental alcohol abuse, with occasional references to drug abuse; and parental personality and psychopathology as origin of family violence. The greatest amount of space is allotted to a brief review of a family systems perspective, in the authors’ rendering perhaps the broadest approach, ranging from stress induced by socioeconomic conditions to Wilson and colleagues (1980) observation that children are more likely to experience abuse at the hands of a step-parent than a biological parent. Whereas these thumbnail summaries of perspectives are fair, this chapter also includes a disappointingly short section on sociobiological approaches. It features the general idea of men using violence as a means of coercive control of women to ensure their paternity of the women’s offspring, but it remains vague and there are no pointers to the substantive evidence on which this theorizing is based (for example, Daly and Wilson 1998; Smuts 1996). Other approaches that have been offered to explain family violence, for example the feminist approach that relates family violence to gendered power differentials in society (Yllo and Bograd, 1990), are entirely absent.
The third chapter discusses the impact of violence that is perpetrated by a caregiver on children, focusing on consequences pertaining to physical injury, externalizing behaviors, internalizing behavior, cognitive function and social development. Moving beyond the adult-on-child violence, Kashani and Allan raise the important issue of sibling violence as underestimated and under researched facet of family violence. Another pertinent topic, namely, sexual violence against children, is not reviewed in this chapter, presumably because there exists a separate volume in the Sage series in which the present book appeared (Ferguson and Mullen, 1999).

But family violence not only is damaging when children are the immediate victims of physical violence. Chapter 4 discusses the consequences of being exposed to family violence as witnesses, with focus on similar areas of impact as in the previous chapter. Unfortunately, this chapter does not pay much attention to social–psychological consequences, specifically how violence in the home may render attitudes toward violence acceptable or the potential impact of witnessing interparental violence on the acquisition of gender roles. At the same time, there is an interesting section on elder abuse, an increasingly important issue in the ‘graying’ societies of the industrialized West. Further, the authors devote critical attention to methodological shortcomings in research on the consequences of exposure to violence, especially the problem of using highly selective convenience samples.

Sometimes in treatments of family violence, the issue of psychological maltreatment takes a back seat as researchers are more likely to focus on the ‘real’ violence. The fifth chapter suggests, however, that physical abuse may often represent only the tip of the iceberg of repeated humiliation and psychological abuse—which victims may experience as more devastating and enduring than physical violence.

As other areas of social and behavioral science, research on family violence has recognized the necessity to include cultural factors into a proper understanding of the issue. Kashani and Allan offer a review of cross-cultural perspectives in their seventh chapter, focusing primarily on real or hypothesized difference in the incidence of violence in various communities. Because of this limited focus, but also because of the fact that there is little systematic research on how culture affects family violence, this chapter is somewhat disappointing. Again, more sophisticated analyses regarding this issue have appeared after the publication of this book (for example, Vandello and Cohen 2003). There is a marked paucity, though, of cultural analyses of the impact of family violence. One may feel tempted to assume that consequences of family violence are universal. Yet, in light of documented cultural differences in the effects of adverse life events on mental health (e.g. Perilla et al. 2002),
it appears that future research will have to explore whether such an assumption is indeed correct.

Issues of assessing family violence are of great importance to the researcher and the practitioner alike. The seventh chapter on this topic documents an over reliance on certain measures both of the presence of family violence as well as its consequences. For instance, many studies use Straus’s (1979) Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) to assess the occurrence and nature of experienced family violence. Similarly, a great deal of research relied on the Childhood Behavior Check List as a standard measure to assess the impact of family violence. Even if these measures are considered state of the art, using the same measures over and over can produce a narrow empirical base that may not capture the complexity of the phenomenon or even induce biases that may stifle progress (for example, Dobash et al. 1992; White et al. 2000 for a critique of the CTS).

The subsequent chapter, devoted to intervention strategies in violent families, is perhaps the most comprehensive one of the book as its review of major therapeutic approaches is not only (still) up to date, but it also illustrates their complexity. Out of necessity, therapeutic interventions are often aimed simultaneously at victims, bystanders and perpetrators, as well as the family as a whole. This chapter, as most of the book, seems to assume the stereotypical case of male-on-female violence in the context of a heterosexual relationship. While this may be indeed the most frequent constellation in which family violence occurs, female violence in family contexts or violence in homosexual relationship and the treatment issues associated with both are regrettably absent (compare with Peterman and Dixon, 2003).

The final two chapters provide a discussion and application of the research reviewed in previous chapters. Chapter 9 addresses strategies to minimize the risk of family violence as well as factors that mitigate its harmful effect on individuals. The final chapter offers a critical discussion of recurrent problems and omissions in family violence research. For example, even though the methodological quality of studies has improved in recent years, much still is unresolved about the adverse impact of family violence. For example, it is not clear whether the duration or the severity of family violence is more important in causing adverse effects. Similarly, sampling continues to be a challenge to drawing generalizable inferences about the consequence of family violence.

Overall, this volume by Kashani and Allan provides a quick and easy-to-read overview of many areas of family violence and their implications for the lives of children and adolescents. Those interested in greater (or newer) detail may benefit from volumes such as Graham-Bermann
and Edleson (2001) and Holden, Geffner and Jouriles (1998). These works, as well as Kashani and Allen, point to family violence as a major social problem, one that is often vigorously researched, but under-theorized. In this regard, evolutionary and cultural approaches serve as examples of underused theoretical perspectives, even though they are of considerable reach and promise. Evolutionary approaches do not appear to be valued because they are, at least according to Kashani and Allen, difficult to test, even though this is an issue pertinent to all distal explanations of social behavior. And in some circles there is the fear that invoking evolution for the purpose of explanation would render family violence ‘natural’ and, hence, excusable—a line of thinking that is less informed by science, but by the experience of well-supported scientific explanations being (mis-)construed by irresponsible politicians, lawyers and activists to advance their causes. The issue of culture, on the other hand, is often just slapped onto existing models as an additional moderator variable. This static and simplistic view fails to conceive of culture as a rich network of meanings and practices that offers the possibility of a sophisticated analysis of behaviors and experiences. Thus, there is the hope that future research, and by implication future overviews of family violence research and its impact on children and adolescents, will be able to present a more richly theorized field.

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References


