

Social Learning Theory a African American Males Exposed to Violence

Dr. William Ross, LPC-S, LSOTP

Associate Professor

Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling

Prairie View A&M University

P.O. Box 519, MS 2420

Prairie View, Texas 77446, USA.

Abstract

A robust social learning theoretical paradigm provides the framework wherein human service workers are better able to understand some aspect of the reality of African American males exposed to aggressive models of social interaction during their formative years, and who in turn imitate the behavior within the societal context (Aymer, 2008). The purpose of this research is to review the literature of social learning theory with a focus on African American males exposed to violence with the intent of providing direction to human service professionals that work with this population.

Introduction

The primary focus of theories within the human service profession is to seek to understand the complex reality of the person-in-situation. In this regard, the theory has not only developed its bodies of empirically tested knowledge but has drawn on bodies of knowledge from other disciplines (Grinnell, Williams & Unrau, 2012; Rubin & Babbie, 2011). A strong social learning theoretical paradigm provides the framework wherein human service workers are better able to understand some aspect of the reality of African American males exposed to aggressive models of social interaction during their formative years, and who in turn imitate the behavior within the societal context (Aymer, 2008). The purpose of this research is to review the literature of social learning theory with a focus on African American males exposed to violence with the intent of providing direction to human service professionals that work with this population.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory incorporates concepts from classical and operant conditioning theory, and include the learning processes of imitation and identification posited by Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1961), as well as emphasizing the role of the environment in learning behaviors as opposed to biological explanations (Anderson & Kras, 2005). About descriptions of violence, the theory incorporates one-dimensional explanations that while acknowledging the importance of variables associated with adolescent violent behavior and poor psychological functioning, rarely factor them in (DeKeseredy & Perry, 2006). This theory is explanatory and is useful in addressing the motivation for violence either within the person or the environment (DeKeseredy & Perry, 2006).

Urban, particularly low-income, African American youth disproportionately reside in neighborhoods characterized by poverty, crime, and violence (Carlo et al. 2011; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2010), increasing their risk for exposure to community violence as witnesses and victims (CDC 2010). From a social learning theory perspective, the family environment exposes children to attitudes and behaviors related to the development and maintenance of intimate relationships. Development of normative attitudes and behaviors carried into adult intimate relationships can occur via direct imitation and internalization of principles that guide behavior (Bandura 1977). Thus, social learning theory suggests that individuals exposed to family violence in childhood are at increased risk of endorsing violent behavior (Ireland and Smith 2009).

The age of onset of delinquency has become decidedly younger among African American males, with early onset beginning as early as age 10 and the incidence of arrest among this population has increased dramatically for status offenses, such as running away, truancy, vandalism, etc., to non-status crimes such as burglary, rape, and weapons possession (Jonson-Reid, 2002; Aymer, 2008; Kaslow & Thompson, 2008). Another delinquency issue is chronic offenders, who are those youths who have been involved in multiple criminal acts, and African American males are disproportionately adjudicated as persistent offenders (Aymer, 2008; Kaslow & Thompson, 2007, Murrell, Merwin, Christoff, & Henning, 2009; Voisin, 2007). The family is seen as a vital microsystem within the life of a child because this is where children first learn attitudes and behaviors (Berger, 2010). Further, the system consists of interconnected components that are organized around functions that interact to maintain its equilibrium (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2007; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006). Family relationships are crucial during adolescence and close familial relationships can be deterrents to aberrant adolescent behavior (Berger, 2010; McWhirter et al., 2007). Social workers analyze family issues respective to power discrepancies within families and between families and the ecological environment (Robbins, et al. 2006).

A long-standing area of concern within the family paradigm is the fact that children tend to model their parent's deviant behavior (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961; Grusec, 1992; Murrell, Cristoff, & Henning, 2005; Peltonen, Ellonen, Larsen & Helweg-Larsen, 2010; Tremblay, 2007). Researchers have supported the premise that when children observe violence within the home (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Unger, 2005; Bandura, et al., 1961) and in the community (Voisin, 2007), when there is an absence of positive role models and parental monitoring (Eddy & Chamberlain, 2000; Graves & Shelton, 2007, Klostermann & Kelley, 2009), and when they live in an environment in which antisocial behavior is present (Spano, Rivera, & Boland, 2010), they tend to pursue their own deviant goals without taking into consideration the feelings of others (Prather & Golden, 2009; Proctor, 2005; Singer & Hensley, 2004).

Adolescence is a high-risk developmental stage for violent offending and violence exposure at that time can create a pathway of violent behavior (Spano et al., 2010). African American youths are disproportionately more likely to experience forms of poly-victimization, which has been found to be associated with problems adversely affecting the child's bio-psycho-social functioning such as developmental, psychological, cognitive, and physical (Kaslow & Thompson, 2008). Hughes' and Huth Bocks' (2007) research on the correlation between childhood parental stress that adversely affects monitoring and supervision found that the lack of these variables substantially increased the likelihood that aggressive and violent patterns of behavior would be present during adolescence. Their research substantiated the findings of the World Report on Violence and Health authored by Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, and Lozano (2002), which states that "the majority of young people who become violent are adolescent-limited offenders" (p. 31). Berger (2010) describes this type of offender as one whose criminal activity starts in adolescence but ends in adulthood. Studies of children who witness domestic violence in the home also support these findings (Glicken, 2004; Hughes, & Huth-Bocks, 2007; Lewis, Kotch, Thompson, Litrownik, English, et al., 2010; Voisin, 2007).

Consistent with the aforementioned approach, multiple studies suggest that children whose parents handle conflict with aggressive and violent behaviors have poor psychosocial development (Klostermann & Kelley, 2009; Lewis et al., 2010), often approach disputes with others in a similar violent and aggressive manner among peers, particularly between the ages of 12-17 (Spano, Rivera, & Bolland, 2010), and tend to model their parent's deviant behavior in their interpersonal relationships such as dating violence (Berger, 2010; Glicken, 2004).

The Social Environment

The adolescent's environment can act as a positive or negative mediator (Robbins et al., 2007; Slomkowski, Rende, Conger, Simmons, & Conger, 2001; Spano, Rivera, & Bolland, 2010) with regard to the value he/she places on factors such as academic accomplishments, popularity, violence towards others (Murrell, 2005), delinquency, and substance use (Eddy & Chamberlain, 2000; Glicken, 2004; Voisin, 2007; Tremblay, 2007). Further, the environment can also be a conduit for easy access to drugs and guns (Murrell et al., 2005; Glicken, 2004; Slomkowski et al., 2001). Negative experiences within the environment, such as failure in school, can lead to adverse attitudes in adolescents and a sense of non-connectedness (Hughes & Huth, 2007; Pearrow, 2008; Peltonen et al., 2010; Voisin, 2007). According to Lenzi, Vieno, Santinello & Perkins (2012). Social connectedness is the measure of how people come together and interact. At an individual level, social connectedness involves the quality and number of connections one has with other people in a social circle of family, friends, and community.

Connectedness is an ever-present and lasting experience of the adolescent's self, relative to his worldview that incorporates a sense of belonging, and it plays a role in the "psychological adjustment and psychosocial development of adolescents" (McWhirter et al., 2007, p. 116). Ward (2010) posits that what has been lost to African American youth enmeshed in the violence of U.S. society is an awareness that aggression is a violation of the care and connectedness implicit in the notion of Black racial identity and community. Adolescents who do not experience connectedness within their environment will experience a sense of rejection and social isolation, and their interpersonal skills will not be adequate (Berger, 2010; McWhirter et al., 2007). This ultimately will result in a lack of competency, lack of socialization, and a lack of beneficial interpersonal relationships (Berger, 2010; Glickens, 2004; Hoffman & Edwards, 2004).

Merits and Limitations of Social Learning Theory

There are two primary social learning interventions that are useful in human service practice: cognitive counseling and skills building (Cleek, Wofsy, Boyd-Franklin, Mundy, et al., 2009). This theory is also useful in prevention strategies because it offers the client the opportunity to learn necessary social competencies and pro-social responses (Cleek et al., 2012; Eriksen & Jenson, 2006; Prather & Golden, 2009). Family preservation utilizes social learning interventions through the use of in-home modeling of parent/child interaction and parental monitoring that teach families new learning patterns which reinforces healthy emotional regulation and responsiveness (Cleek et al., 2012; Prather & Golden, 2009). This method has proven very beneficial for families who have delinquent children because rules, models, and structural conditions are relevant to issues surrounding antisocial behavior (Prather & Golden, 2009). In working with delinquent juveniles, the theory is useful in targeting the re-socialization of adolescents who are exposed to violence and collaborating with agencies to work together in providing programs to the adolescents and their parents that model positive interpersonal relationships (Anderson & Kras, 2005; Eriksen & Jenson, 2006; Gosselin, 2010).

Bandura's (1977) premise that behavior helps create the environment, and as a result, environmental influences impact behavior was explored in Kaslow and Thompson's (2008) research study with African American mothers and their adolescent sons. Their research confirmed that psychological factors such as the children externalizing their responses to domestic violence through exacerbated violent behavior lends itself to a sense of connectedness to communities in which crime and delinquent behavior are present and observed on a day-to-day basis. This premise was also supported by qualitative research conducted with African American males by Aymer (2008), who concluded that male adolescents of color who live in poor rural and urban environments where crime is present experience severe, and at times treacherous, psychological functioning. Both Kaslow, et al., (2008) and Aymer (2008) posit that research in this area would benefit from more inclusion of cultural variables.

Thornberry and colleagues (1994) and Thornberry and Krohn (2000) revisited Bandura's, (1977) and Bandura, et al.'s (1961) seminal research which suggested that the combination of the interaction between structural, individual, and parental influences bring on early onset of delinquent behavior. Their findings proposed that extreme structural adversity such as socioeconomically disadvantaged families, crime infested communities, and the availability of drugs and guns, are contributing factors to parenting deficits, such as reduced family management skills and ineffective parenting. Peltonen et al. (2010) contributed to these findings in his study of 15-16 year-old-adolescents and commented that the "lifetime" count of adolescent experiences of familial violence had been utilized as an assessment of child well-being and mental health (p. 814). Murrell and colleagues (2005) also built on the research conducted by Thornberry (1987, 1997) and Bandura et al. (1961) positing that witnessing inter-parental violence as a child is related to violence and aggression in adulthood, and Bandura's (1977) suggestion that human behavior is mostly transmitted socially either through deliberate means or inadvertently as a result of observing models of coping with conflict. However, their research was not conducted primarily with African American males in varying geographic locations and issues relative to cultural competence and diversity, as well as the fact that matters of structural poverty and racial discrimination were not expressed in the application of the components of social learning theory affecting behavior (Robbins et al., 2007).

Children are exposed to community violence when they witness a stranger in the street, a casual acquaintance from their neighborhood, or another student at their school, physically assaulting another person to rob him, settling a fight, venting anger, or making a threatening statement. Children are victims of community violence when they are the subject of a physical attack, or a threat of a physical attack, with or without a weapon, by anyone who is not in their intimate circle; e.g., someone other than a parent, caregiver, friend, or other individual living in the house.

Social learning theory also does not lend itself to the fact that on a daily basis some minority children are confronted with community violence and racial discrimination without the support of family members or positive role models (Burt, McGue & Iacono, 2010; Gosselin, 2010; Mrug & Windle, 2009). Many are left on their own by negligent parents and communities with few resources to learn how to cope with crisis and conflict through their ecological environment and life experiences (Burt et al., 2010; Gosselin, 2010). However, the theory is useful in explaining the relevance of the need for family cohesiveness and structure in African American male coping, mainly when they have parents who are supportive, who model positive interactive behavior, and who reinforce this behavior in their children beginning in early childhood (Burt, Donnellan, Iacono, & McGue, 2011; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007).

Impact on Psychological and Behavioral Functioning and Violence

To some degree, social learning theory is useful in the explanation of pathways of risk and protective factors within a child's environment, but it does not go any further (Armstrong et al., 2005). Research has proposed several characteristics found in resilient children and adolescents which act as protective barriers that prevent them from engaging in destructive behaviors and that enable them to cope constructively when facing challenges (Armstrong et al., 2005). These characteristics have a positive impact on adolescents' behavioral and psychological development as well as their ability to gain positive attention from others within the family and society (Burt et al., 2010); acquire competence in social interaction, school, and cognitive areas (Klar, Reuter, McGue, Iacono, & Birt, 2011; Mrug & Windle, 2008); the ability to problem solve (Wallace & Roberson, 2011; Wareham, Boots & Chavez, 2009); and, the ability to efficiently negotiate emotionally dangerous situations (Margolin, Vickerman, Ramos, Serrano, Gordia, Hurrell, Oliver, et al., 2009). As mentioned previously, social learning theory aims to explain the processes by which aggressive behavior is learned or acquired by individuals such as parental or community violence (Anderson & Kras, 2005; Nijhof, deKemp, & Engels, 2009), juvenile delinquency (Smokowski, Mann, Reynolds, & Fraser, 2004), understanding the root causes of crime (Prather & Golden, 2009), child maltreatment (Tremblay, 2007), patterns of child rearing (Whiteman, McHale & Crouter, 2007; Whittaker, Harden, See, Meisch, & Westbrook, 2011), antisocial behavior (Eddy & Chamberlain, 2009), sexual abuse (Gosselin, 2010), and juvenile gang activity (Bailey & Coore-Desai, 2002; Proctor, 2005; Stinson & Becker, 2008).

The explanatory tenets of social learning theory are useful in studying human behavior in the social environment and as such the adoption of the principles of this approach within the human service profession is threefold. First, many of the principles of social learning lend themselves readily to application of the helping context that is embedded in the foundation of human service practice (Robbins et al., 2006); second, it has been shown to have a high degree of validity and is useful in understanding human learning as well as psychological and behavioral adaptation in the social environment (Hoffman & Edwards, 2004; Hughes & Huth-Bocks, 2007); and third, its fundamental tenets may be usefully applied to theoretical development in other areas of human services (Jonson-Reid, 2002; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006). Thus, the theory can indeed be used to help guide practice with families who have sick parenting behaviors, which play a role in the trajectories of their children's social and emotional development (Button & Gealt, 2010; Cleek, et al., 2012; Macchi & O'Conner, 2010; Nijhof, deKemp, & Engels, 2009; Whittaker, Harden, See, Meisch, & Westbrook, 2011).

In working with delinquent African American males, the theory is useful in targeting positive socialization of adolescents who are exposed to violence (Prather & Golden, 2009), and collaborating with agencies to work together in providing programs to the adolescents and their parents that model positive interpersonal relationships (Anderson & Kras, 2005).

The premise that social interaction is a product of social learning is paramount to the acquisition of knowledge about African American males exposed to aberrant parental and community conditions which could result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and service provision to families before their arrest (Button & Gealt, 2010; Jonson-Reid, 2002). The family system has been viewed as a composition of interdependent and interrelated members who can develop patterns of behavior that (a) over time, result in modeling the behavior (Prather & Golden, 2009), and (b) each family member becoming accustomed to acting in a particular manner which in turn elicits specific reactions from others (Whittaker, et al., 2011). This could account for an explanation of deviant behavior in children, whose formation of identity and interpersonal relationships largely depend upon the family context in which they are members (Raevuori, Dick, Keski, Rahkonen, Rose, Rissanen, et al., 2007; Slomkowski, Rende, Conger, Simmons, & Conger, 2001) as well as their future psychological and emotional functioning (Prather & Golden, 2009; Raevuori, et al., 2007; Spano, et al., 2010).

The implications for practice in this area are quite crucial as ecological and social learning theoretical paradigms can influence the assumptions made about male sibling relationships in the construct of juvenile delinquency (Raevuori et al., 2007; Slomkowski et al., 2001). However, social learning theory does not lend itself to better understanding how human services define these interactions and how they can affect the dimensions of human service policy, research, treatment, and intervention.

Theoretical Modifications

Based on the above consensus, it is essential to enhance this theory, possibly by combining it with an intergenerational transmission paradigm, in working with African American males who are disproportionately exposed to higher rates of violence compared to other adolescent populations (Hughes & Huth-Bocks, 2007; Kotch, et al., Pearrow, 2008; Voisin, 2007; Wareham, et al., 2009). There are modifications that could be made to social learning theory that would also enhance its cultural relevance applicability for African American families. Based on research studies conducted with African American families utilizing social learning theory, the following modifications to the method might be made so that it is culturally relevant to this client population.

With harsh economic predictions, it is projected that minority communities will continue to become marginalized and disenfranchised, which will lead to higher crime rates and increase the need for families to seek public welfare services (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Pearrow, 2008; Wareham et al., 2009). While human service education has made some efforts toward teaching diversity, models are not consistent and have followed a paradigm that is either a cultural sensitivity or cultural competency approach (Ortiz & Jani, 2010), but just have not proven effective in attending to the needs of minority families in distress (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2010; Pearrow, 2008).

A modification that might be made to social learning theory is that human service professionals, who have African American males in their caseloads with a history of exposure to family and community violence, can utilize this argument in a modified approach including critical race theory (CRT). Unlike social learning theory, CRT makes no assumptions of universal truths; preferably it is based on the premise that race does matter, is socially constructed and as such, is permeated in all aspects of society (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). Secondly, there are very few studies that focus on the intersection of child maltreatment and the impact of parental and community violence in a non-adjudicated African American male sample (Kotch et al., 2010; Pearrow, 2008). Social learning theory can be modified to include tenets of the intergenerational transaction of delinquent behavior with empowerment theory to develop community-based intervention before the adolescent coming into contact with the juvenile justice system (Kaslow & Thompson, 2007; Pearrow, 2008).

Very little have been undertaken that utilize social learning theory relative to socio-demographic variables using African American parents, who undergo multiple environmental contextual stressors such as racism, unemployment, and underemployment, which adversely impact family violence, parenting ability, and economic hardship as the primary study sample (Whittaker, et al., 2011). As mentioned previously, the theory does address environmental and family issues from a deficit perspective but offers no tangible solution from a strengths perspective (Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 2007; Whittaker et al., 2011). Also, it does not address family and adolescent limited psychological and behavioral functioning from a proximal perspective such as poverty adversely affecting parental mental operation, which in turn decreases the parent's ability to provide caregiving that is attentive and sensitive to the child's needs (Whittaker et al., 2011).

One needed modification of the theory in this context is that it be tested with more samples of multiethnic groups such that the scope is not as narrow as it is presently (Crawley & Crawley, 2009; Hughes & Huth-Bocks, 2007; Pearrow, 2008; Voisin, 2007). While social learning theory addresses contextual environmental stressors and provides an explanation for social learning within the context of these factors (DeKeseredy & Perry, 2006), it does not provide a mechanism for addressing and alleviating them nor reducing the use of punishment and negative reinforcement such as termination of parental rights in the case of child maltreatment as opposed to behavior modification through correcting faulty learning (DeKeseredy & Perry, 2006). Once modified, the theory can be useful when utilized with extensive training modules such as how to relieve environmental stressors through education, empowerment, interpersonal relationships, and culturally specific parenting classes that model positive behavior (Macchi & O'Connor, 2010). Data collected in this area can contribute to modifying the theory to the extent that it also addresses the fact that parenting behavior is ethnic-specific but that all parents can be taught, through culturally competent community educational programs, how to change their aberrant behavior (Crawley & Crawley, 2009; Kotch, 2010; Pearrow, 2010; Wareham, et al., 2009).

Conclusion

Themes identified in the literature indicate that there is a need for further study relative to the possibility that siblings act as moderators of the effects of reduced family relationships (Frisell, Lichtenstein & Langstrom, 2011) and that older siblings are essential sources of companionship, emotional support, and assistance in the face of parental stress and little or no parental attachment (Stormshak, Bellanti, & Bierman, 1995; Whiteman, McHale & Crouter, 2007). Research conducted by Slomkowski, et al., (2001) proposed that there was a lack of empirical studies on siblings and delinquency and that they can exert a “detectable, pronounced, and unique influence on the development of antisocial behavior in childhood and adolescence” (p. 271). Findings of their research also indicated that there is congruence in sister/sister and brother/brother delinquent behavior and that there is a unique interactive style in which brothers more readily, and at an earlier age, engage in and promote delinquent behavior. These findings were supported in research conducted by Whiteman, McHale, and Crouter (2007) which examined older siblings’ influences on their younger brothers and sisters in four domains: risky behavior, peer competences, sports interests, and art interests. Their findings showed that second-born siblings were more similar to their older brothers and sisters across all domains. They also found that sibling concordance is highest when siblings are close in age and that this relationship influence occurs as a top-down process to the extent that the older sibling plays the role of “adviser, model, and gatekeeper” (p. 970).

In a study conducted by Eley (1998) the influence of genetics on the correlation between aggression and delinquency found that 50% of the shared variance in these traits was due to genetic factors, 40% to a shared environment and only 10% was due to the non-shared environment. Genetics play a vital role in affecting self-esteem in adolescence. In research analyzing genetic and environmental influences on self-esteem and its stability in youth, Raevouri and colleagues (2007) found that the heritability of self-esteem had an alpha of .82 due to genetic factors. Further study in this area can significantly add to current social work literature and practice.

There is a need for further studies with regard to theoretical application focused on clarifying how African American children exposed to community and parental violence cope with conflict, possess a distorted view of problem resolution, and are predisposed to use acting out as a coping mechanism (Aymer, 2008; Jonson-Reid, 2002; Klar, Reuter, McGue, Iacono, & Birt, 2011; Mason, Hitchings, McMahan, & Spoth, 2007).

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