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Exploring Gender Differences in the Association Between Young African American Mothers' Reports of Preschoolers' Violence Exposure and Problem Behavior

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Abstract

The prevalence of children's violence exposure, particularly among ethnic minorities living in urban areas, is troubling. Gender differences in the rates and effects of violence exposure on behavior have been found for older children, and the current study extends this research to preschool-age children. We draw on data collected from a sample of 3- to 5-year-olds born to 230 adolescent African American mothers living in Washington, DC. Girls and boys were exposed to comparable levels of witnessed and directly experienced violence. In contrast to findings from studies of older children, preschool-age boys' and girls' externalizing and internalizing behavior were comparably associated with directly experienced and witnessed violence. These findings highlight the importance of further developmental research to differentiate the effects of violence exposure as children grow older.

The prevalence of violence in low-income communities has drawn attention to the consequences of violence exposure for children (Osofsky, 1999). In the literature, violence exposure is typically conceptualized as either directly experienced or witnessed maltreatment occurring at the interpersonal (i.e., domestic violence) or community level. Although adolescents are more likely to experience and witness community violence, there is evidence that young children are also negatively affected by such violence exposure (Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Osofsky, 1999). In particular, experienced and witnessed violence have been linked to young children's aggressive behavior (Margolin & Gordis, 2004), supporting the supposition of social learning theory that children learn from aggressive models in their environments (Bandura, 1977). Violence exposure has also been associated with children's symptoms of posttraumatic stress, academic problems, and cognitive difficulties (Margolin & Gordis, 2004), possibly because when a child's sense of security is threatened, he or she may have difficulty regulating emotions and attention (Lynch & Cicchetti, 2002).

There is also some evidence, albeit mixed, that the behaviors associated with directly experienced and witnessed violence differ for boys compared to girls (Voisin, 2005). For example, among 9-year-old children whose parents were the victims of severe violence (e.g., shootings), boys showed more externalizing problems, and girls showed more internalizing problems (Dulmus & Hilarksi, 2006). Among early adolescents exposed to high levels of community violence, witnessing violence was more strongly associated with anxiety and depression for girls than for boys (Foster, Kupermin, & Price, 2004). Furthermore, boys' psychological symptoms (i.e., anxiety, depression, anger) were more strongly associated with their directly experienced, as compared to witnessed violence, whereas girls' posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms were significantly associated with both types of violence exposure.

These findings are consistent with the proposition that girls and boys are socialized to experience and express emotions differently (Keenan & Shaw, 1997). However, it is unclear how early this socialization process and the discrepant effects of violence exposure on behavior and psychological distress emerge.

To address this question, the present study examined whether externalizing and internalizing behaviors are differentially associated with directly experienced versus witnessed violence among preschool-age boys and girls who were born to adolescent mothers. Exploring gender differences in behavioral responses to violence exposure is important inasmuch as it contributes to a better understanding of the causes of emotional and behavioral problems within each gender (Rutter, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2003). Therefore, in addition to testing for gender differences in levels of violence exposure and behavior problems, this study examines how associations between violence exposure and behavior vary by child gender. In this way we add to the existing literature on older children and adolescents and help build a developmental model of the process by which violence exposure affects girls' and boys' behavior.

Research indicates that, as early as the toddler years, parents begin to socialize their daughters and sons to express emotions differently (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007), with girls reinforced for displaying sadness and boys for anger (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Drawing on this evidence, we hypothesized that, when exposed to violence, preschool-age girls would exhibit more internalizing behavior problems than boys whereas preschool-age boys would exhibit more externalizing behavior than girls.

The evidence is less clear as to whether children of preschool age will be differentially affected by witnessed versus experienced violence. During this developmental phase, children learn to regulate emotions and to take others' perspectives. Both of these skills are related to the capacity to experience empathy (Hinnant & O'Brien, 2007) and may therefore influence how preschool-age children respond to witnessed violence. Most research suggests that girls display more empathy than boys (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998) and that there are gender differences in how children learn to perceive others' distress (Zahn-Waxler, 2000). For example, Hinnant and O'Brien reported that 5-year-old girls seem to instinctually respond emotionally to another's distress, whereas boys rely more on cognitive processes (i.e., perspective taking) to enact an empathic response. Such findings bring into question whether these gender differences will be reflected in young children's behavioral responses to witnessed versus experienced violence. However, we are mindful of the significant individual variability in the development of perspective-taking capabilities and therefore did not propose specific hypotheses about the pattern of behavioral associations with witnessed versus experienced violence exposure for preschool-age boys and girls.

METHODS

Participants and Procedures

We draw on data from a cross-sectional study of young African American mothers and their children living in a violence-prone, urban area. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Children's National Medical Center in Washington, DC.

Participants were recruited from 90 community-based sites such as day care centers and primary health care clinics, selected because they serve a general population of mothers and children rather than only adolescent mothers, clinically referred patients, or families receiving services related to violence exposure. Out of 2,349 mothers who contacted research staff about participating in the current study, 262 (11%) were eligible based on the following inclusion criteria: mother age 18 to 24 years; child age 3 to 5 years; mother African American and nonimmigrant; mother has legal and physical custody of child; and child free of serious, chronic

health problems. If eligible mothers had more than one child 3 to 5 years old, the oldest was selected as the focal child. Although these inclusion criteria were stringent, this sample was selected to be representative of the approximately 898 African American adolescent women in the DC area who gave birth annually between 1999 and 2004 (National Vital Statistics System, 2005).

The overwhelming majority of eligible mothers (97%) agreed to participate; nonetheless, 8% of these were unavailable at their scheduled appointment times, and attempts to reschedule their interviews failed. The final analytic sample consisted of 230 mothers who gave written informed consent and completed the in-person interview. Interviews were scheduled at a time and place convenient to the mothers, conducted in English by trained research assistants, and

lasted $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 hr. For their participation mothers were given a \$50 gift certificate redeemable at a local store.

The young mothers participating in this study were, on average, 22 years old ($SD = 1.50$), and most (69%) had at least graduated from high school or earned their GED. Approximately one third (38%) were attending school, and 43% were employed. The majority (61%) of young mothers lived with their own mothers and/or grandmothers, whereas 17% were living alone with their children. Most (78%) mothers were no longer romantically involved with their focal child's biological father, 8% were romantically involved but not living with the father, and 13% were cohabiting with or married to their child's father. The largest portion of young mothers (34%) reported annual household incomes in the \$0 to 5,000 range, and only 22% reported annual household incomes greater than \$30,000. On average, the target children of these young mothers were 50.3 months old ($SD = 10.59$) and approximately half (49%) were male.

Measures

Violence exposure scale for children (Fox & Leavitt, 1995)—The Violence Exposure Scale for Children assesses parents' perceptions of children's exposure to violence and has been found reliable among primary caregivers of minority preschoolers living in urban areas (Shanifar, Fox, & Leavitt, 2000). For each violent event, mothers reported how frequently their child had witnessed (12 items/events) or been the victim (8 items/events) of the event using a 4-point scale from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*lots of times*; see Table 2 for sample items). Composite scores were created by summing frequency responses across items with higher scores indicating greater exposure to violence. Cronbach's alpha was .58 for *child experienced* and .80 for *child witnessed* violence. Because the experience of one violent event does not necessarily increase the likelihood that a child will experience a different event, the experienced violence subscale was not expected to have high internal reliability.

Child behavior checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Ruffle, 2000)—The CBCL is a commonly used 113-item measure of children's emotional and behavioral functioning. For each item, mothers reported the frequency with which their child exhibited the behavior during the past 6 months on a 3-point scale from 0 (*never*) to 2 (*frequently*). After summing responses across items, raw Internalizing Total Scores and Externalizing Total Scores were converted to *T* scores which adjusted for age and gender.

Demographic characteristics—Maternal education and employment were included as control variables because evidence suggests they are highly correlated with young children's behavioral outcomes (Bornstein, Hahn, & Suwalsky, 2003; Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang, & Glassman, 2000). Maternal education was measured by asking participants the highest grade or level of school they had completed with response categories ranging from "never attended

school” to “some college or bachelor’s degree.” Maternal employment was measured by asking participants how many hours per week they worked for pay in a typical work week (range = 0–84, $M = 14.92$, $SD = 18.92$). Employment was measured as hours worked instead of a dichotomous variable or index of income because there is evidence suggesting that the amount of time mothers spend working outside the home can influence their children’s behavior (Greenstein, 1995).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for each of the variables of interest in the current study. On the CBCL, approximately 12% of children had T scores above the borderline-clinical cutoff for externalizing problems, and 17% scored above cutoff for internalizing problems. There were no significant differences between boys and girls on average T scores for externalizing, $F(1, 228) = 1.11$, ns , or internalizing, $F(1, 228) = .06$, ns , or on rates of borderline externalizing, $\chi^2(1) = .25$, ns , or internalizing behavior problems, $\chi^2(1) = .33$, ns . The equivalency between boys’ and girls’ problem behavior may be due in part to the standardization of CBCL T scores which adjusted for child gender.

On average, mothers reported that their children had experienced two episodes of violence and witnessed seven violent events. There were no significant gender differences in the overall levels of violence children experienced, $F(1, 226) = 1.03$, ns , or witnessed $F(1, 226) = .22$, ns , nor in the percentage of children exposed to each form of violence (see Table 2). As opposed to violence exposure rates among elementary school-age children (Richters & Martinez, 1993), the preschool-age boys and girls born to adolescent African American mothers in our sample did not appear to experience or witness different levels of violence. Past research suggests that older boys are victimized more often than girls because they are generally more involved in violence as perpetrators as well as victims (Scarpa, 2003). Gender differences among preschoolers’ violence exposure may not have emerged yet because preschool-age children are less likely to be involved in such peer-based violence (e.g., bullying, gangs).

Bivariate correlations among the control, independent and dependent variables for boys and girls are presented in Table 3. We computed Williams’s T_2 statistics to test whether there were differences in the bivariate associations between types of violence exposure and problem behavior within each gender (Steiger, 1980). We found that among girls there were no significant differences in the correlations of witnessed versus experienced violence with externalizing, $t(114) = .71$, ns , or internalizing T scores, $t(114) = .00$, ns . Among boys there was also no significant difference in the correlations of witnessed versus experienced violence with either externalizing, $t(110) = -1.35$, ns , or witnessed violence, $t(110) = -.98$, ns .

These findings suggest that young girls *and* boys tend to display more externalizing and internalizing behavior problems when they have been exposed to either directly experienced or witnessed violence. Whereas older boys’ behavior tends to be more strongly affected by directly experienced as compared to witnessed violence (Foster et al., 2004), our findings suggest preschool-age boys’ behavior is comparably associated with their own victimization and that of others. It may be that younger boys have yet to develop older males’ propensity to interpret situations as threatening and thus react aggressively (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996), which may in part explain adolescent boys’ increased externalizing behavior when directly exposed versus not being personally involved in violence.

Next we considered whether the associations of each form of problem behavior with violence exposure differ by child gender. We expected that violence exposure would predict more externalizing behavior among boys and more internalizing behavior among girls. Table 4 displays results of hierarchical multiple linear regression models predicting children’s

internalizing and externalizing *T* scores from mother employment and education (retained as control variables due to significant associations with girls' behavior), child gender (1 = female, 0 = male), experienced violence, and the interaction between child gender and experienced violence. These models show main effects of experienced violence on both externalizing and internalizing behavior, but no significant interaction with child gender. Similar results of a main effect of witnessed violence exposure on externalizing and internalizing CBCL *T* scores but no significant interaction with gender are shown in Table 5.

The lack of significant interactions suggests that the behavioral response to both witnessed and experienced violence is similar for preschool-age boys and girls. Earlier research indicates that older children tend to exhibit gender-specific responses to violence exposure with boys showing more externalizing and girls more internalizing (Dulmus & Hilarksi, 2006; Foster et al., 2004). It is possible that the lack of specificity in the behavioral responses of preschool-age girls and boys to violence exposure reflects the overwhelming nature of violence for children of this age.

The findings of the present study are limited in several ways. First, these findings may not generalize to all children of young African American mothers due to participants' self-selection into the research study. Second, the measure of child violence exposure relied on maternal report, which may have underestimated levels of violence exposure if mothers were not aware of all of the violent episodes their children had experienced or witnessed (Thomson, Roberts, Curran, Ryan, & Wright, 2002). However, it is unlikely that mothers underestimated boys' exposure to a different degree than girls', so this limitation should not have influenced our findings regarding gender differences. In addition, the Violence Exposure Scale (Fox & Leavitt, 1995) is an aggregate measure that does not capture nuances such as who perpetrated the violence or the child's relationship to the victim of a witnessed violent episode, and thus we cannot distinguish interpersonal from community violence exposure. More detailed examination of the contexts of children's exposure to violence could help explain behavioral responses to violence. Fourth, there may be problems due to shared variance between mother-reported child violence exposure and child behavior, such that mothers' awareness of their child's violence exposure may skew their reporting of their child's behavior or vice versa. However, it remains uncertain whether preschool-age children can provide accurate self-reports of their violence exposure (Shanifar et al., 2000). Finally, because of the cross-sectional nature of this study the causal direction of the association between child violence exposure and behavior cannot be determined. Future longitudinal research that explores the role of violence exposure and gender in the development of behavior problems would be valuable.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

In sum, the findings of this study suggest that, unlike gender differences in the behaviors associated with violence exposure seen in older children, when children are 3 to 5 years old, girls' and boys' behavior are comparably related to witnessed and experienced violence. Both witnessed and experienced violence are associated with increases in boys' and girls' externalizing and internalizing behavior. These findings suggest that interventions targeting younger violence exposed children should address exposure to both witnessed and experienced violence and the likelihood of increased externalizing and internalizing behaviors in both genders. These findings further contribute to an emerging developmental model of children's gender-specific maladaptive behavioral responses to violence exposure.

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TABLE 1

Demographic Variables, Child Violence Exposure, and Child Behavior

Variables	Overall ^a		Boys ^b		Girls ^c		<i>F</i> / χ^2
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	%	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	%	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	%	
Mother Demographics							
Education							2.62
Less than HS Diploma		31		28		33	
HS Diploma or GED		39		42		37	
Some College		30		30		29	
Employment (Hours per Week)	14.92 (18.92)		14.51 (19.25)		15.32 (18.66)		.10
Child Violence Exposure							
Experienced	2.15 (2.14)		2.01 (2.16)		2.30 (2.12)		1.03
Witnessed	7.23 (4.81)		7.38 (4.74)		7.08 (4.90)		.22
Child Behavior							
Externalizing (<i>T</i> score)	51.43 (11.32)		51.62 (12.48)		51.26 (10.13)		1.11
Problem Cutoff ($t \geq 64$)		12		13		11	.25
Internalizing (<i>T</i> score)	53.41 (10.34)		52.68 (11.18)		54.12 (9.45)		.06
Problem Cutoff ($t \geq 64$)		17		16		19	.33

^a*N* = 230.^b*n* = 113.^c*n* = 117.*
p < .05.**
p < .01.***
p < .001

TABLE 2
African American Children's Violence Exposure as Reported by Young Mothers

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Experienced Violence</i>				<i>Witnessed Violence</i>			
	<i>% Overall Exposed</i>	<i>% Boys Exposed</i>	<i>% Girls Exposed</i>	χ^2	<i>% Exposed</i>	<i>% Boys Exposed</i>	<i>% Girls Exposed</i>	χ^2
Yelled at	71	65	76	2.8 4.0	96	96	97	.00
Something Thrown at	12	11	12	.14	53	58	50	1.45
Pushed	20	20	20	.00	71	70	72	.14
Chased	10	10	10	.00	25	22	29	1.30
Slapped or Hit	5	5	4	.12	40	44	37	1.29
Beaten up	3	3	4	.48	36	38	35	.26
Robbed	5	5	5	.00	7	9	4	1.88
Gun or Knife Pointed at	1	3	0	3.0 9.0	5	8	3	3.28
Stabbed		NA			1	2	1	.36
Shot at		NA			2	2	2	.00
Arrest		NA			43	44	42	.15
Dealing Drugs		NA			12	13	11	.21

TABLE 3
Correlations Among Mother Demographics, Child Violence Exposure, and Child Problem Behavior

	Mother Education	Mother Employment	Child Experienced Violence	Child Witnessed Violence	Child Externalizing Total Score	Child Internalizing Total Score
Mother Education	—	.27**	-.02	-.06	-.21*	-.18*
Mother Employment	.45***	—	-.14	-.07	-.20*	-.18*
Child Experienced Violence	.00	-.11	—	.42***	.44***	.41***
Child Witnessed Violence	-.03	.05	.45***	—	.50***	.41***
Child Externalizing Total Score	-.01	-.09	.45***	.33***	—	.71***
Child Internalizing Total Score	-.16	-.14	.36***	.27**	.73***	—

Note: Correlations for girls ($N = 117$) are above the diagonal and correlations for boys ($N = 113$) are below the diagonal.

*
 $p < .05$.

**
 $p < .01$.

 $p < .001$.

TABLE 4

Effects of Experienced Violence Exposure on Preschoolers' Problem Behavior

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Externalizing</i>			<i>Internalizing</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>β</i>
Step 1						
Mother Education	−1.29	.91	−.09	−3.04	.83	−.24***
Mother Employment	−.03	.04	−.05	−.01	.04	−.02
Child Gender	−.24	1.92	−.01	.51	1.76	.03
Step 2						
Experienced Violence	2.58	.45	.49***	1.84	.41	.38***
Step 3						
Gender × Experienced Violence	−.52	.63	−.09	−.04	.58	−.01
<i>F</i> (5, 221)		12.12***			11.60***	
Total <i>R</i> ²		.22			.21	

Note: Parameter estimates are for the final hierarchical model.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

TABLE 5

Effects of Witnessed Violence Exposure on Preschoolers' Problem Behavior

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Externalizing</i>			<i>Internalizing</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>β</i>
Step 1						
Mother Education	-.78	.92	-.06	-2.66	.85	-.21**
Mother Employment	-.07	.04	-.11	-.04	.04	-.07
Child Gender	-1.51	2.49	-.07	.42	2.29	.02
Step 2						
Witnessed Violence	.87	.21	.37***	.64	.19	.30***
Step 3						
Gender × Witnessed Violence	.16	.29	.07	.11	.26	.05
<i>F</i> (5, 221)		10.29***			9.43***	
Total <i>R</i> ²		.19			.18	

Note: Parameter estimates are for the final hierarchical model.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.