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Researching Parent Abuse: A Critical Review of the Methods

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'Parent abuse' is the most under-researched form of family abuse and the research that exists is characterised by diverse and discrete methodological approaches which have produced somewhat inconsistent findings. This critical review examines these different research approaches and discusses the methodological challenges which they present. The review concludes by suggesting how research might develop to produce a more coherent and contextual methodology which does justice to the complexities of the topic.

Keywords: Parent abuse, methodology, violence, families, young people.

Introduction

Research into parent abuse is still in its infancy and research findings regarding its extent and characteristics are widely disputed. For example, estimates as to its prevalence vary from 7 per cent to 29 per cent. Some researchers find it more prevalent in middle-class households (e.g. Paulson *et al.*, 1990), while others do not (e.g. Kethinani, 2004). Some suggest mothers are more at risk (e.g. Evans and Warren-Sohlberg, 1988), while others suggest not (e.g. Peek *et al.*, 1985). Some suggest sons are more at risk (e.g. Boxer *et al.*, 2009), while others suggest not (e.g. Agnew and Huguley, 1989). Kennair and Mellor (2007) have provided a thorough and accessible overview of the literature and the lack of consistency in findings is apparent. However, their literature review (as well as others – see Robinson *et al.*, 2004; Stewart *et al.*, 2005) fails to analyse how *methods* might shape these disparate findings, and there is an urgent need to understand the challenges to identifying, conceptualising and researching 'parent abuse' to enable a better response to it. This critical review is an attempt to do that.

Researching parent abuse

Given the hidden nature of parent abuse, and the 'double-stigma' which it is likely to entail (see Holt, 2011), a clear challenge for research is the problem of access: how can we find out about something that we have trouble even naming?¹ And without a name, how can others identify their experiences as such and come forward? Given this conundrum, it is perhaps unsurprising that a fairly limited range of research methods have been utilised so far, although more innovative methods do appear to be on the horizon. Broadly speaking, there are four main methods which have produced knowledge about parent abuse: (a) secondary analysis of criminal justice data, (b) large-scale epidemiological surveys (c) interview data elicited from intervention groups and (d) case studies and typological analyses derived from clinical samples.

Secondary analysis of criminal justice data

The analysis of existing criminal justice data has been an early and relatively dominant method for exploring 'parent abuse', since it can produce large quantitative datasets to enable the identification of case characteristics of both parent and child/young person. Such data have been collected at different stages of the criminal justice process, and are dominated by work in the United States. For example, at the policing stage, Evans and Warren-Sohlberg (1988) analysed seventy-three police case reports concerning parents' formal complaints about 'parent abuse', while Walsh and Krienert (2007) examined nearly 18,000 cases of CPV ('child-to-parent violence') across twenty-three US states using the incident and arrest recording system (known as NIBRS). At the judicial stage, Cochran *et al.* (1994), Kethineni (2004) and Gebo (2007) all examined US county court records of juveniles convicted of violence against family members, including parents.

One strength of this approach is the availability of comparative groups to enable the identification of mediating variables: for example, Walsh and Kreinert (2009) subsequently compared the CPV group with adolescents who committed parricide, and found distinct differences in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and weapon use. Gebo (2007) compared her sample with a sample of sixty young people who were committing non-familial violent offences and found that those sentenced in family violence cases were dealt with more leniently by the courts. A similar comparative design by Kennedy *et al.* (2010) found young offenders who were violent towards parents showed greater psychological disturbance and greater association with gang members than those who were not. Outside of the US, Ibabe and Jaureguizar (2010) examined the case files and judicial proceedings of seventy adolescents in Bilbao, Spain, who had committed violent offences against parents (half of whom had also committed other types of offences) and compared them with a sample of thirty-three adolescents who *only* committed non-familial offences. Their results suggested that the 'parent abuse only' sample constitute a unique group sharing a particular psychosocial profile.

However, it is important to recognise that the group of adolescents who come through the criminal justice system as a result of their abusive behaviour is likely to be a very distinct group, as are the families who report them and the forms of abusive behaviour which are reported. Thus, these data are likely to represent the 'thin end' of the wedge; that is, those whose behaviour lies at the severest end of the violence spectrum (with physical abuse more likely to be processed than other forms of abuse) and those with already problematic family relations. Indeed, such methods may tell us little beyond how criminal justice systems process such young people once they have come into contact with them and like other forms of 'official' crime data, tend to find males, Black and minority ethnic groups and those from the poorest families over-represented. Furthermore, even *within* these types of studies, they may not represent equivalent populations, since families with particular characteristics may 'drop out' before reaching the next stage (e.g. reaching court) of the justice process. It is therefore problematic to make *general* conclusions about the characteristics of families involved in 'parent abuse' using such data.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that such approaches only tell us the information which criminal justice agencies deem to be important for their own purposes in the processing of offenders and the reduction of crime. Thus, we learn much about the *who* and the *what* of 'parent abuse' (or, more accurately, of those young people who are criminalised for parent abuse-related offences) in terms of statistical frequencies, but they

tell us little about the *how* and the *why*, although they certainly serve as a useful starting point.

Large-scale epidemiological surveys

Large-scale surveys, usually quantitative and sometimes randomised, have also been used to find out about parent abuse. The majority of these have taken place in schools with children and young people, often on the back of larger surveys. For example, Agnew and Huguley's (1989) drew on the US-based *National Survey of Youth* (1972) to obtain self-report data from 1,395 eleven to eighteen-year olds. While finding no evidence for age or gender 'risk factors' from questions concerning violence towards parents, they did find some interesting correlates concerning beliefs, 'attachment style' and peer group. Both Peek *et al.* (1985) and Brezina (1999, 2000) reviewed data from the US-based national *Youth in Transition* (1966–1969) survey of male adolescents, with Peek *et al.* (1985) identifying some surprising risk factors (such as more violence directed towards fathers), while Brezina (1999) identified correlations to suggest that adolescents may be reacting *in response to* parental aggression towards them. From Canada, Pagani *et al.* (2004, 2009) report on data from the *Quebec Longitudinal Study of Kindergarten Children (1986–1996)*, which followed up 2,908 children from the ages of six to fifteen using questionnaires and interviews with children and their parents, finding a positive correlation between harsh parental punishment and adolescent aggression towards mothers and fathers. More recently, the national *Youth at Risk Survey* (2000) questioned 2,004 US youths, living at home, on a range of 'risky behaviours', and Elliot *et al.* (2011) found a significant negative correlation between self-reports of 'hitting parents' and measures of adolescents feeling that they 'mattered' to their families.

Specific crime surveys include Pagelow *et al.*'s (1989) survey of 473 US university students, which found 13 per cent admitted violence against family members (mostly parents), and in the UK, Browne and Hamilton's (1998) survey of 232 psychology undergraduates, which found 14.5 per cent admitted to having used violent tactics against a parent. Victim surveys include Edenborough *et al.*'s (2008) *Child to Mother Violence Scale* (CMVS),² which was posted to 6,000 mothers living in areas of high violence in Australia, producing 1,024 responses. While the quantitative data from this study are yet to be published, the authors produced a small-scale qualitative analysis of the 185 written responses to their final qualitative question regarding their experiences, identifying common themes concerning mothers' growing fear of violence and their difficulties in accessing support.

However, just as the criminal justice data tells us information that it is pertinent to the criminal justice system, so large-scale surveys correlate parent abuse only with those psychosocial characteristics that are reducible to quantified 'variables' (e.g. 'quality of attachment', 'parenting style', etc.). Furthermore, with the exception of Brezina (1999) and Pagani *et al.* (2004), who compared waves of data to examine longitudinal effects, they all involve cross-sectional analysis. Thus, while such surveys arguably provide us with a static 'snapshot' of parent abuse, they tell us little about process or context.

Interview data from intervention groups

A third method for producing knowledge about parent abuse involves collecting data from service users who are already participating in some kind of family intervention

programme. Most of this research has been small-scale and qualitative, utilising interviews and/or observations with parents, although some include young people and/or practitioners. Such studies have primarily focused on the experiences and effects of parent abuse, although antecedents have also been identified to enable inductive theory-building. For example, Cottrell and Monk (2004) drew on three studies which included interview and focus group data from parents, young people and counsellors to identify factors (described within 'ecological levels') which may be involved in the production of parent abuse. Such methodological approaches have lent themselves to innovative techniques: Eckstein (2004) asked twenty parents to narrate one experienced episode of verbal, physical and emotional abuse to enable an exploration of the communication patterns involved in child–parent abusive interactions; Howard and Rottem (2008) used genograms to map out the family relationship context with the ten mothers they interviewed.

Often such studies are produced to evaluate the outcome of a programme intervention. For example, in Australia, Paterson *et al.* (2002) used a series of self-report questionnaires and in-depth interviews to measure episodes of violence and change with eighteen mothers who were participating in a group counselling intervention programme. Qualitative experiences of living with abusive adolescents (e.g. 'walking on eggshells') are discussed alongside questionnaire data to demonstrate the programmes' positive impact in both reducing violence and the associated anxiety. Smaller evaluation studies have been conducted by Doran (2007) in Canada and Daly and Nancarrow (2009) in Australia, which examined restorative justice interventions, and Munday (2009) in the UK, which evaluated a local partnership intervention programme.

In the United States, the increasing use of the *Step-Up* programme has produced a number of recent evaluations. For example, Routt and Anderson (2011) interviewed and observed 268 families in Seattle, Washington who were participating in the *Step-Up* programme, and combined this with court records, observations and interviews with programme staff. This study is unusual in its use of mixed methods to not simply triangulate the data but to enable the qualitative experiences of parent abuse to be theorised by drawing on the individual, family and systemic antecedents identified using the statistical analyses of both their programme sample and the county records.

However, as with the use of criminal justice data discussed above, such approaches also draw from a very distinct population which produces its own particular problems. In most cases, the families are self-referring, and in any case are only likely to have come forward in areas where such support programmes are available. Even in cases where families are referred by other agencies (such as criminal justice agents), previous research suggests that it is particular kinds of families who are seen as 'in need' and are selected for family intervention programmes; that is, lone parents, mothers and those experiencing financial difficulties (Holt, 2010).

Of course, the limitations of 'self-referral' also apply to participation in research interviews, making the issue doubly problematic. Although interviews traditionally yield a higher response rate compared to questionnaires (70–80 per cent compared to 50 per cent for the most sophisticated questionnaire), Gelles (1990) comments on how these response rates decrease when the topic of discussion involves family violence. Given this difficulty, some studies have elicited qualitative data unintentionally: Jackson (2003), Stewart *et al.* (2007), Holt (2009) and Hunter *et al.* (2010) all obtained qualitative data concerning parents' experiences of 'parent abuse' when interviewing parents about a different topic.

An alternative approach has been taken by Holt (2011), whose analysis of anonymous postings on online parenting support message boards is particularly illuminating in its consideration of how the emotional fallout of parent abuse is played out within an *online arena*. While small in number and scale, these studies are important as they access that majority of parents who do not seek help and whose experiences are invisible to institutional number-crunching: that is, the 'thick end' of the wedge.

Clinical approaches: case studies and typological analyses

Harbin and Madden's 1979 paper is often considered the first research publication to have specifically focused on 'parent abuse'. It is relatively unusual in drawing on the authors' own case notes and clinical observations of families in treatment³ to highlight how particular analytic concepts (such as 'parentification' and 'denial') might help us understand how parent abuse can emerge. However, since then, very few published articles have taken this case study approach: notable exceptions are Micucci (1995) who used a single case study from an adolescent in-patient to illustrate family characteristics and therapeutic principles when working with 'parent abuse', Sheehan's (1997) analysis of her own observations and case notes from work with sixty families referred for therapeutic intervention and Gallagher's (2004a, 2004b) influential publications examining his own therapeutic work with seventy families.

Instead, clinical approaches have taken a much more typological approach. For example, Nock and Kazdin (2002) examined the profile of 606 adolescent outpatients, 12 per cent of who engaged in parent-directed aggression, and their use of a control group enabled them to distinguish individual and family characteristics (e.g. 'lower frustration tolerance', 'parental stress') specific to this population. Similar typologies have been developed from Laurent and Derry's (1999) analysis of 645 children hospitalised in a child and adolescent psychiatry department in France (finding 3.4 per cent parent 'batterers') and Boxer *et al.*'s (2009) sample of 232 cases taken from a database of families referred for the clinical treatment of emotional and behavioral problems in adolescence. At the furthest end of the clinical spectrum, there are a handful of studies which have focused on the relationship between aggression towards parents and particular clinical 'syndromes' such as Tourettes Syndrome (e.g. DeLange and Olivier, 2004) and ADHD (e.g. Ghanizadeh and Jafari, 2010).

A key trend within this approach is the development of 'screening instruments' to enable identification of 'parent abuse', such as Boxer *et al.*'s (2009) adaptation of the *Conflict Tactics Scales* (Straus, 1979) to operationalise YPA (youth-to-parent aggression) and Ghanizadeh and Jafari's (2010: 76) *Abused Parent Questionnaire*. While such moves are positive in that they force researchers to consider the minutiae of definitions, as with the survey data there is a question mark over the validity of such tools, including the decontextualised nature of the measures and the well-recognised problems with relying on participant recall of past incidents.

Researching parent abuse: the need for contextualised research

Over the past thirty years, it is fair to say that research into parent abuse has been sporadic, inconsistent and characterised by diverse yet discrete methodological approaches. Of course, when starting out researching any 'new' social problem, it cannot be otherwise.

However, this review highlights the methodological, epistemological and practical limits that have been reached, and it is perhaps time to pause and consider how we might develop new directions. Three specific suggestions come to mind, all of which are underpinned by the need for greater contextualising research which might enable a dialogue across existing methodological islands:

1. *Lengthening the scope of research: relating proximal factors to distal factors*

The concept of a 'funnel of violence' (Wolfe *et al.*, 1997) is frequently invoked to enable the consideration of proximal and distal factors which shape violent outcomes. Distal factors include cultural and political forces which shape the acceptability of violence in terms of respect given to elders or the extent to which violence is tolerated in media representations of the young, for example. Proximal factors include the family and the individual and usually make themselves known in the form of individualised 'risk factors' (e.g. gender, ethnicity etc.). However, as is evident from this brief review, there does appear to be a preponderance of research at the proximal end of the spectrum and this can be a problem when researchers draw on such findings from other national contexts to make inferences about their own – not only because findings do not translate well across differing organisational contexts but also because differing contexts shape experiences of parent abuse in the first place. Similarly, while Finkelhor (1983) is right to observe that power is central to all forms of family abuse, it is important to recognise that power operates distally as well as proximally – hence Archer's (2006) finding that women's violence against men increases in contexts where women have greater political and economic power. This raises interesting but as yet unexplored questions regarding how emerging *children's rights discourses* in countries such as the UK might be implicated in parent abuse. Such a wider political and cultural analysis which considers the changing structural and political position of children/young people and their parents is currently missing, yet it has the potential to enhance our understanding of parent abuse specifically, and of family abuse more generally.

2. *Widening the scope of research: contextualising parent abuse within family abuse*

There is already a wealth of evidence which suggests that parent abuse takes place within a wider backdrop of family violence. In particular, research suggests that witnessing inter-parental violence increases the likelihood of engaging in parent abuse (e.g. Ullman and Strauss, 2003; McCloskey and Lichter, 2003) and that parent abuse co-occurs with parent-to-child abuse (e.g. Brezina, 1999; Boxer *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, research suggests that young people who are abusive to parents *may* go on to behave abusively towards dating partners (e.g. LaPorte *et al.*, 2009). Such findings highlight the need for a contextualising, dynamic approach to researching parent abuse, which is important for at least two reasons. First, it would help to identify trajectories from one form of victimisation to another, and therefore in the development of prevention strategies. Second, research into family violence has consistently shown how polyvictimisation produces worse effects in the experience of any one form of violence, particularly in reducing *resiliency* in overcoming its effects (Finkelhor *et al.*, 2007) and in increasing the risk of *intergenerational transmission* (Heyman and Slep, 2002). Therefore, while also

keeping hold of what makes parent abuse unique (to enable appropriate intervention strategies), it is vital that we recognise what parent abuse shares with other forms of family violence to enable theoretical integration.

3. *Transforming the scope of research: towards trans-disciplinarity*

While this review has highlighted the range of disciplines which has produced knowledge about 'parent abuse' (e.g. psychology, psychiatry, social work, criminology), there is little evidence of dialogue between them. This is a problem because positioning 'parent abuse' within any one particular discipline can limit the possibilities for both theoretical development and practical intervention. For example, research which analyses criminal justice data inevitably positions the problem – and therefore the solution – within a criminal justice framework, and it may be unhelpful to 'criminalise' young people (and their families) in this way, both theoretically and in practice. However, with a heterogeneity of definitions, populations and outcome measures, joining up the disciplinary dots remains a challenge. As with 'intimate partner violence' (IPV), it is likely that the most effective theoretical and practical responses will be produced by contributions from a range of academic and professional disciplines. However, at present we have an approach to parent abuse which is *multidisciplinary*, and because each discipline offers its own conceptual and methodological perspective, the outcomes are disparate and incoherent. *Inter-disciplinarity* would be an improvement, with disciplines – and their associated methodologies – combining to provide more coherent and holistic analytical accounts of parent abuse. The final goal might be the development of a new *trans-disciplinary* approach which establishes an entirely new way of theorising and researching parent abuse.

Conclusion

This review began by arguing that, so far, research findings into parent abuse are disputable, and in part this is due to the diverse and discrete methods which have been used to produce them. However, what is indisputable is that parent abuse is happening in all populations and is not going away. Over the past thirty years, we have made important in-roads into this topic, but I would argue that we have reached a crossroads. We now need to reconsider the ways that we are researching parent abuse, and think about how new methodological approaches might overcome the challenges brought about by using proxy measures, small samples, retrospective accounts and unsystematic evaluations. Despite the wealth of 'risk factors' which criminal justice data and large surveys have produced, we are still a long way from understanding how a particular 'population risk' becomes a 'specific risk', and how we might intervene at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Similarly, without random controlled trials (RCTs) in the evaluation of intervention programmes, we cannot infer whether programmes actually produce change and which elements of the programme facilitate which changes.⁴ Furthermore, some of the methodological challenges we face mirror challenges in practice. For example, should we focus on parent, child or both? The majority of studies reviewed here focus on just one family member participant but, as Pagani *et al.* (2004, 2009) report, different family members do produce differing accounts of parent abuse. Parent abuse is a relational and contextual phenomenon, and our next step must be to move beyond researching

'individuals' and 'dyads' and to explore how parent abuse operates within community, national and global contexts.

Notes

- 1 The research base refers to this topic using a range of terms (see Hunter and Nixon, this volume): in this review, the terms used are those commensurate with each author's use.
- 2 See Edenborough *et al.* (2011) for discussion of the CMVS.
- 3 Indeed, the medicalised title ('*Battered Parents: A New Syndrome*') emphasises the clinical foundations of its research design.
- 4 See Weinblatt and Omer (2008) for a discussion of the potential of RCTs in this topic area.

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