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# Differential Association: The Paradox of Spousal Abuse and Domestic Violence

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## *Introduction*

This paper will attempt an analysis of family violence and abuse within a home. The perspectives of the children, the parents will be incorporated in the analysis as well as the differences between gender, age and race.

The different types of family violence and their effects on each member of the family. Why and how does family violence occur? Whether the gender of a victimized child matters. Are women and men affected differently? If so, what are the impacts of experiencing abuse as a child and how are they reflected differently or similarly when these children become adults. Are there any differences within same sex relationships? These questions will be addressed and analyzed through Edwin Hardin Sutherland's theory of differential association. Sutherland, a renowned criminologist of the twentieth century brought forth a theory composed of nine distinct principles in regards to the process of learning criminal behaviour. These nine concepts will consist of the basis for this analysis of family violence within the household, a paradox yet to be explained.

While the rate of serious violence such as homicides within the family are declining, the issues concerning abuse and assaults remain. The rate of intimate partner sexual assaults have increased by 15% in Canada since 2010 (Burczycka and Conroy, 2017, p. 48). The issues revolving around domestic abuse and its effects on society remain to be of great concern to the Canadian population.

## *Why does Family Violence Occur?*

In order to understand why family violence occurs, it is essential to comprehend how crime is learned in order to occur. The occurrence of family violence is a form of paradox through Sutherland's theory of differential association. The first three components of Sutherland's theory are as followed:

- “i) criminal behaviour is learned
- ii) criminal behaviour is learned in interaction with other persons and communication
- iii) the learning of criminal behaviour occurs within intimate personal groups” (Davies, Sept. 18).

These first three criteria of his theory revolve around the process of learning criminal behaviour such as violence towards a spouse or child via an individual with an intimate personal status to the child, suggesting an individual such as a parent or a sibling. Through this observation, one's immediate assumption is that a spouse learned their hostile behaviour not from a television show, movies or video games but through an individual of personal importance to them, relinquishing the myth that individuals may become violent solely through the media. According to this assumption, children would be the individuals prone to learning criminal behaviour most effectively, through their parents, then portraying this hostility afterwards. This phenomenon is proven through Albert Bandura's Bobo doll experiment (Arshad-Ayaz & Graham, 2016, p. 262). This experiment explains how a young child exposed to regular violence of any shape by an

adult of importance to them such as feuds between his or her parents might be reflected later by harming the ones around them and even their spouse later in life. I consider this a paradox because it seems that children do assimilate behaviour from their elders but this would not explain how family violence begun. Therein lies a flaw within Sutherland's theory. Sutherland's theory fails to fully describe the processes by which crime is learned. In order for crime to be learned by individuals through communication with individuals of importance to them, it had to have begun somewhere. This question leads us into why family violence occurs.

There are countless reasons associated with race, background and gender which could explain why family violence occurs. Domestic violence within Canada's immigrant population is mainly caused by economic or financial stressors. This applies to teenage parents but mainly applies to immigrant men who often give up everything in order for their wives and children to integrate as well and as quickly as possible to the Canadian society. This often leaves them without jobs and leads to frustration which may turn into domestic violence towards either a child or spouse (Bacon et al., 2008, 906). Bacon *et al* described how these immigrant men often held great status in their native countries above their wives then having to relinquish their status leaving their wives with higher status than themselves in Canada, which leads to issues between the spouses (Bacon et al., 2008, 906). In the perspective of a child, the child will learn that behaving in a hostile manner towards their children or their spouse is completely acceptable if it is in order to

*let off some steam*, as a means of recollection of oneself. Such a response is explained by the fourth and fifth principles of Sutherland's theory which read:

“iv) When criminal behaviour is learned, it includes the techniques of committing crime and specific motives and attitudes.

v) The specific direction of motives and drives of a crime is learned through the legal code as favourable or unfavourable” (Davies, Sept. 18).

Under Sutherland's theory, family violence would continue due to the fact that the act of committing violence towards others is desensitized and the individuals find more benefits and gain through hostile behaviour than conforming to the norm. This principle is the sixth principle of Sutherland's theory of differential association (Davies, Sept. 18). Sutherland's sixth principle; “a person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definition favourable to the violation of the law over definitions unfavourable to the violation of the law” (Davies, Sept. 18). This principle explains that through visual cues, a child, for example deems that since his father, an important figure to him is doing such a thing, he as well should do the same. He does so because he believes it is the right thing to do, assuming that hostile behaviour towards a spouse has more benefits than drawbacks.

### *Effects of Family Violence*

The effects of domestic and family violence have tremendous impacts on society. Once again the continuous nature of family violence causing children to act out what they see at home is in effect. Some may drop out of school and even join gangs (Bacon et al., 2008, p. 907). Violence towards anyone including family members is seen as a deviant act in Canada, but other actions such as excessive spanking which may be considered abuse in Canada is seen as discipline in other countries around the world, particularly several African countries, where spanking is seen as a form of training and discipline. (Bacon et al., 2008, p. 907).

Other effects of family violence involve physical harm resulting scars and bruises or mental harm, leading to depression and anxiety amongst other mental illnesses. As previously mentioned, family violence may be seen as a paradox through its never ending cycle of children being exposed to their parents' feuds, then continuing this chain by doing the same to their spouses as adults but this may happen even earlier in life depending on the intensity of the exposure of abuse experienced by the child.. This idea is supported by Sutherland's seventh principle: "differential association may vary in frequency, duration, priority and intensity" (Davies, Sept. 18). This principle revolves around how often a child, for example, would be exposed to deviant behaviour, for how long, priority in terms of how early in life and intensity as the strength of the relationship to the person the individual is learning the deviant behaviour from. The intensity and priority of differential association is an extremely important concept proved through a study of violence within teen dating. Studies have shown that teenagers who have been

exposed to spousal abuse at a young age often reflect these experiences as early as in their teenage years (Grych, Jouriles, McDonald & Mueller, 2012, p. 60-62). The paradox is once again at play when you consider that a father's upbringing may have considerable effects on how he may act as a father figure (Guterman & Lee, 2005, p. 141). This endless loop of learning is no different from any other generational learning or any other forms of learning. As Sutherland's eighth principle suggests: "the process of learning delinquent behaviour by criminal association and anti criminal patterns involves all of the mechanisms in any other learning" (Davies, Sept. 18). The process of learning the deviant behaviour does not vary much but the effects differ in terms of the sexuality of the children.

### *Same Sex Couple Violence*

A study done on same sex couple violence revealed that physical violence itself seemed to be less within these relationships but the participants suffered extremely high levels of emotional abuse, particularly in lesbian relationships. This study conducted by Susan Turell in 2000 showed that within their diverse sample, violence within lesbian relationships was fairly low and that most of the issues were associated with emotional abuse. She deducted a similar conclusion regarding gay men but her sample was far smaller than that of lesbian women (Turell, 2000, p. 282-283). This study is important in our analysis because while it might be an old study, the broad nature of the sample

represents the Canadian population in a great manner and it also displays another key facet of family violence and spousal abuse such as emotional abuse which is seldom considered.

### *Gender Differences*

This analysis has mainly been focused on young boys and their fathers but are there any differences in the effects or impacts of family violence and spousal abuse? There appears to be major differences in the reflection of spousal abuse depending on ones gender. For men, as mentioned earlier, they tend to reflect these experiences by abusing their children and their spouses as adults and may even do so throughout their teenage dating years. Whereas men, enact the actions of their fathers, women tend to marry men of abusive nature if they experienced in the household as young girls (Abbott, Baradaran, Guterman, Lamb & Sternberg, 2006, p. 94-96). Other main differences between the two genders is the fact that women are much more likely to experience sexual abuse than men as children. A study done in Los Angeles with a diverse sample reflected that females had thrice the chance of getting sexually abused in the home than men (Kernsmith, 2006. 167-168).

### *Critiques and Limitations*

Thus far, Sutherland's theory of differential association seems to explain family violence and spousal abuse at a great extent. It appears to explain the process of why family violence occurs and how it does so. Yet, there are some possible critiques analysis regarding the gender bias of this analysis. Much of the analysis revolves around men, but there is considerable reason to do so because men are the individuals mostly at fault in terms of family violence and spousal abuse. There are instances and situations when women are at fault but most of these situations are either undermined and diminished or they are never reported. Men are individuals who adore power as mentioned earlier, they are beings who like to be in charge of their families. Through this it appears that men would rather not report abuse against them, and instead cope with it whether that relationship be amongst teens, or within same sex relationships (Anderson, 2010, p. 726-733). The ninth and last proposition of Sutherland's theory; "while criminal behaviour is an expression of general needs and values, it is not explained by those general needs and values since non-criminal behaviour is an expression of those same needs and values", meaning that jealousy might be the reason for spousal abuse within the household but not all jealous spouses act in a hostile manner towards their significant other. Criticism around this analysis might arise concerning the fact that most of the analysis assumed that young children who were exposed to domestic violence and abuse would portray them in one way or another upon their teenage years and adulthood. Lastly, criticism around the idea that Sutherland's theory of differential

association does not explain why certain offenders who have never had experiences with domestic abuse growing up engage in such behaviour when they mature might arise. This was not the purpose of this paper. This paper is adopts the phenomenon of domestic violence and spousal abuse under Sutherland's theory of differential association and attempts to explain it.

### *Conclusion*

Throughout this analysis, the phenomenon of spousal abuse ad domestic violence was discussed under Edwin Hardin Sutherland's theory of differential association. His theory explains how deviant behaviour is learned by potential delinquents. Though physical violence crimes in the household have been declining in Canada, the number of reported abuse cases have not been insignificant. The differences between impacts and effects between genders were addressed as well as the major differences when the abuse occurs in same sex relationships. The occurrence of family and spousal abuse was described as a paradox through Sutherland's theory. The differences between what might be considered abuse and discipline between the different cultures within Canada's diversity were addressed as well as their impacts on society. The criticism around my adoption of Sutherland's theory towards domestic violence and spousal abuse were also addressed. In conclusion, my adoption of Sutherland's differential association theory seems to be a startling case of *like father like son*.

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