Normalization of Violence: Experiences of Childhood Abuse by Inner-City Crack Users

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Abstract

An increasing literature mostly based on retrospective surveys has been consistently documenting a correlation between physical abuse in childhood (CPA) and substance abuse in adulthood (ASA). This article uses ethnographic data to reveal the processes behind and context of this linkage for one population—poor, inner-city New York residents who became crack users. Life in the inner city is qualitatively different than in more fortunate circumstances. CPA is but one of numerous stressors and factors contributing to ASA. Approximately half of the subjects reported clear recollections of being physically beaten by their mothers or their various male partners. Although several denied being beaten in childhood, they typically reported various forms of physical assaults that they "deserved." Physical assaults, especially by mothers, were often understood as expressions of love. As such, these respondents viewed their ongoing physical assaults as an ordinary part of their childhood and adolescence. Such physical punishment also socialized and prepared children for the violence that would likely occur during their childhood in their inner-city communities. This analysis highlights how reducing substance abuse in the inner city may require a much more comprehensive effort than a focus on reducing CPA. These findings also have important implications for quantitative research regarding CPA and ASA. Such studies should subdivide their analyses by socioeconomic status to more clearly measure how much of a risk factor CPA represents among wealthier populations and how much not being abused may serve as a protective factor among poor inner-city populations.

Keywords

child abuse; *ecology*; *measurement*; *poverty*; *substance abuse*

INTRODUCTION

An increasing amount of literature has been documenting a correlation between abuse (both physical and sexual) in childhood and substance abuse in adulthood (e.g., Brems, Johnson, Neal, & Freeman, 2004; Medrano, Zule, Hatch, & Desmond, 1999; Plant, Miller, & Plant, 2004). Many of these studies have been documenting that among clinical samples of substance abusers that high percentages had been abused as children, with higher rates than among non-substance abusers. The strength and consistency of this finding suggests that there might be one (or more) developmental pathway involving physical abuse in childhood (CPA) that leads to substance abuse in adulthood (ASA).

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Despite, or perhaps because of, the mounting evidence, there has been extensive methodological discussion regarding how to best measure and interpret the CPA-ASA relationship. This introduction briefly reviews some of the issues and partial solutions based on the use of alternative data sources. We then describe the important contribution of ethnographic research to this scholarly inquiry and introduce original findings regarding CPA among a group of poor inner-city New York residents who became crack users. These subjects could easily be classified as crack abusers based on the extent of their drug-related social, legal, and health problems, although a clinical determination is not included in this study.

Measurement Issues

Much of the research on CPA and its consequences has examined surveys in which adults provide closed-ended responses to standardized questions regarding their experiences in childhood. Such retrospective reports are subject to a variety of response biases involving recall and disclosure about a sensitive topic that potentially threatens their validity. Widom, Raphael, and DuMont (2004) suggested that these biases might be so extensive that observed relationships such as the CPA-ASA association could be an artifact of the methodology. Widom, Weiler, and Cottler (1999) compared retrospective reports with prospective data from a matched sample study. They found that the sample of children who had been abused or neglected were no more likely to become substance abusers than their counterparts in the matched sample. However, they found that respondents who met the criteria for ASA were substantially more likely to retrospectively report that they had been abused or neglected as children. They concluded that retrospective reports might be heavily affected by mood-congruent recall. In particular, persons experiencing difficulties as adults may have constructed a consistent narrative of their life course. In this manner, they might have been more likely to recall, report, and interpret past experiences as abusive, including those that occurred in childhood.

On the other hand, Kendall-Tackett and Becker-Blease (2004) identified potentially important limitations to longitudinal research on the sequelae to child abuse and neglect emphasizing the important contribution of retrospective findings. They noted that prospective designs may not identify all cases of abuse and that unreported cases may actually be more severe than those brought to the attention of authorities, particularly because child protection agencies are obligated to intervene in situations where child abuse has been reported.

Other research has raised questions about the pathways and mechanisms leading from child abuse and neglect to substance abuse. Dong et al. (2004) found that various measures of abuse (physical, sexual, and emotional), neglect (physical and emotional) and household dysfunction (parental separation or divorce, substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and crime) were highly correlated. Accordingly, they recommended that studies of child abuse should include an array of other adverse childhood experiences as controls. Otherwise, one factor could serve as a proxy for another excluded variable. Moreover, it might not be possible to isolate the effect of a single factor such as childhood physical abuse because it is part of a complex of broader traumatic experiences. Accordingly, some scholars have advocated use of a summary scale of the number of adverse childhood experiences (Dube, Felitti, Dong, Chapman, et al., 2003; Horwitz, Widom, McLaughlin, & White, 2001). These studies have found that the likelihood of illicit drug use and related problems increased with the number of adverse childhood experiences.

Just as there are many possible influences, there are numerous and interrelated possible outcomes. Studies have indicated that childhood abuse can result in a wide range of negative outcomes in adulthood, including drug abuse, alcohol abuse, mental illness, and physical

illness (Dube, Felitti, Dong, Giles, & Anda, 2003; Horwitz et al., 2001). These findings suggest that traumas such as CPA do not explicitly code for a single negative outcome such as ASA. Rather, CPA contributes to a vulnerable condition that can lead to a variety of subsequent problems. Other research has suggested that there may be an important intermediate factor. Children who endured CPA and other adverse experiences manifest a range of predictable physical, psychological, and emotional symptoms that have been characterized as post-traumatic stress disorder (Deykin, & Buka, 1997; Silva et al., 2000; Triffleman, Marmar, Delucchi, & Ronfeldt, 1995; Widom, 1999). This condition can endure well beyond childhood and may be the proximal cause of negative outcomes in adulthood including ASA.

Placing Analyses in Context

Much of the research on CPA has focused on variables. Compton Thomas, Conway, and Colliver (2005) noted that a similar emphasis has generally dominated research on the epidemiology of drug use and drug use disorders. More broadly, illicit drug use and CPA can be understood as possible elements embedded in the interrelated processes that constitute an environment in which children develop into adults. Understanding the association among these experiences requires an understanding of the larger social and developmental processes. Moreover, these processes may differ dramatically across segments of the population. Much prior literature has examined how child development takes place within an ecological context, which affects the presence of stressors and their significance, interpretation, and ultimately sequelae (Belsky, 1980; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Garbarino, 1977; Lau et al., 2006; Zielinski & Bradshaw, 2006).

Using ethnographic data, this paper examines the CPA experienced in childhood among inner-city New York residents who became crack users. Ethnographic data provide a powerful source for documenting and examining the tangled factors and context associated with phenomena such as CPA and ASA. They are less useful for documenting the prevalence of these conditions and identifying the extent to which various factors may be causally related. This article examines the CPA experienced by inner-city residents who became crack users. Previous analyses based on this research have examined child sexual abuse (Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2003), violence in the household (Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2004; Dunlap, Johnson, & Rath, 1996), and the intergenerational reproduction of norms for violence and drugs (Dunlap, Golub, Johnson, & Wesley, 2002; Dunlap, Sturzenhofecker et al., 2004). The conclusion discusses important implications of these findings for understanding the association between CPA and ASA as well as the implications for further qualitative research, quantitative research, and policy development regarding CPA, ASA, and poverty.

METHODS

Throughout the 1990s, the authors were involved in a series of longitudinal ethnographic studies of drug abuse and sales, violence, and family functioning within severely-distressed, predominately African-American households in inner-city New York. The research followed an omnibus ethnographic methodology, which focused on uncovering a variety of behavioral patterns as well as the underlying conduct norms and the social or developmental processes affecting lives within a strained context. Ethnographers spent much time in the households and more broadly in the study neighborhoods directly observing the rhythms of life. Study procedures were approved by the author's institutional review board to assure that the evolving standards for human subjects' research as required by the National Institutes of Health were met at every stage of the project.

Data Collection

Access was negotiated through key informant contacts (Dunlap & Johnson, 1999). Households were selected to represent a range of experiences typical of this population. Field staff attempted to obtain geographic diversity and assure that subjects were not members of the same peer networks. The full study involved a total of 178 participants in 72 families from inner-city New York.

Project staff initially approached the household head and sought his or her informed consent to participate in the study. Data were also obtained from other household members who provided informed consent, including children, spouses, parents, other relatives, lovers, and friends. Households were studied for 3 to 5 years, during which time subjects were observed and interviewed at least quarterly. Some households were recruited for subsequent studies and at the time of this writing had been continuously studied for more than 10 years.

The project employed semi-structured interviews to collect comprehensive information regarding a uniform set of topicS across subjects. Unstructured answers provide contextualized responses in the subjects' own voices and led to longer dialogues and recollections regarding the key themes of the work. The topics covered in the questionnaires explicitly examined growing up, violence in the home, drug use in the home, sexual and physical assault, and early experiences of both sex and drugs among others. Interviewers asked follow-up probing questions to elaborate on related occurrences and the importance of these events based on their developing understanding of the subjects' experiences. Interview information was supplemented with field notes regarding what was observed in the household and the neighborhood.

This analysis examines reports of CPA among those subjects who were regular crack users (mostly daily or more frequent) during the 1990s. Not all of the information regarding CPA, ASA, and other aspects of subjects' lives was obtained in a single interview. During the first interview, subjects were often hesitant about disclosing personal information and wanted to make a good impression. Over time, however, ethnographers established a personal relationship with respondents because the same ethnographer returned on a regular basis to perform follow-up interviews. A deep level of rapport was accomplished and trust between the ethnographer and respondent was achieved. In time, subjects came to speak more freely about a wider range of sensitive topics. Over the course of the study, subjects' life stories were corroborated and the representativeness of their experiences ascertained through multiple interviews, discussions with others, observations, and direct experiences of the households and neighborhoods. Through personal connection and involvement with subjects' lives, the project developed a rich understanding of their experiences and behaviors as a continuous narrative of inter-related events involving other people and prevailing circumstances.

Participants

Most of these subjects grew up in severe poverty. These persons endured most if not all of the adverse childhood experiences identified by Dube, Felitti, Dong, Chapman, et al. (2003). They suffered severe and ongoing versions of the abuse, neglect, family strife, and household afflictions that Dube, Felitti, Dong, Chapman, et al. (2003) assign a single point in their 10-point scale of adverse childhood experiences. Developmental conditions in these households might reasonably be characterized by a much higher score than a 10, representing the severity of the distressed conditions, and that even more conditions were present. Broader research into childhood poverty and its outcomes identify additional risk factors these children continually endured, including substandard housing, hunger, poor nutrition, lack of medical and dental attention, educational failure, lack of privacy, property

crime, parental substance abuse, persistent unemployment, limited social capital, neighborhood violence, despair, and more (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Kasarda, 1992; Kozol, 1996; Lichter, Graefe, & Brown, 2003; Luthar & Cushing, 1999; Wilson, 1996).

Perhaps the households studied are off the general scale of adverse experiences developed by Dube, Felitti, Dong, Chapman (2003) or perhaps any such quantitative scale cannot fully capture all of the adverse factors related to CPA and ASA. Growing up in these difficult conditions differs qualitatively from more fortunate circumstances. These severely distressed inner-city households were typically unstable (see Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2004, in press; Dunlap, Johnson, & Rath, 1996). Women generally held the leases due to their eligibility for housing subsidies. Their male partners generally depended on them for their living arrangements. Female–male partnerships typically dissolved after a few months or years. Male partners (fathers of the household children) were regularly thrown out or chose to move on. On moving out, the men entered new relationships, went to jail, or moved in with various relatives. We refer to these routine and frequent changes in household composition as *transient domesticity.* Apartments were also lost for not paying bills or not staying on welfare. Throughout this turmoil, children tended to stay with their mothers when possible, although they were often removed by child protection agencies or lived with a grandmother or aunt. In time, a household typically included a mother, her current boyfriend, children from more than one relationship, and perhaps other relatives (especially mothers and siblings, their partners, and their families).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

All interviews were audio taped to document and preserve the accuracy of responses. A qualitative database was maintained using FileMaker Pro to straightforwardly access qualitative data and ethnographers' field notes from their observations. Grounded theory was employed to identify common patterns and test the relevance of tentative theories against the range of experiences among sample members (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For the purposes of the current paper, data from all the respondents were analyzed for common themes regarding CPA and illustrative quotes were identified.

Two theoretical frames were central to interpreting the findings, phenomenology (Carini, 1975) and symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 1978). The unifying theme running through these perspectives is the importance of understanding the meanings of human behavior and the socio-cultural context in which interactions and the specific arrangements occur. This interpretive paradigm emphasizes the need to reveal the interconnected system of social roles and purposes that hides beneath the ordinariness of everyday experience. Accordingly, understanding any social phenomenon requires unraveling the dynamic definitions and the interactional patterns of the social actors.

The symbolic interactionism perspective contends that social meaning develops from and then is modified through interaction among social actors. Blumer (1969) holds three principles as central: (1) that people act toward objects and events on the basis of the meanings these things hold for them; (2) that meanings arise out of the communicative interaction between and among individuals; and (3) that communication is a symbolic system that uses and creates new symbols. Such symbols help us shape our reality and influence others. According to symbolic interactionism, people engage in reflexive behavior rather than merely respond to environmental stimuli (Blumer, 1969). In this manner, they co-produce their experiences and attach meanings to the routine patterns of their lives. These principles guided this study not only in the data interpretation but also in the data collection phase. Close contact and immersion in the everyday lives of the subjects provided insight into their patterns of social interactions, the underlying social and developmental processes, and the significance they attach to them.

RESULTS

A broad reading of the data clearly indicates that numerous factors contributed to the eventual crack use and crack-related problems of subjects included in this analysis. One central factor was coming of age or being a drug-using adult during the 1980s in the inner city during the peak of the crack era (Johnson, Golub, & Dunlap, 2000). Inner-city youths born since 1970 have seen the damage crack brought to individuals and their communities and have shunned its use (Furst, Johnson, Dunlap, & Curtis, 1999). However, not everyone coming of age in the 1980s became crack users. Living in poverty in the inner city with its numerous attendant problems was almost certainly an important contributing factor. CPA may have also been a significant factor, as described below.

Household Violence

A major finding from this study is that violence was commonplace in the household. Prior analyses from this study have documented that household violence is part of a complex of subcultural norms also involving drug use and sexual exploitation (Dunlap et al., 2002; Dunlap et al., 2003). Quarrels between partners regularly turned to threats and assaults. Adults sometimes became violent when using drugs. Other adults tended to be less violent when they had their drugs; their grouchiness often arose from their come down or from frustration associated with raising money to pay for drugs. Children were regularly assaulted. Mothers were often violent toward their children.

> **Daddy Long** (black male born in 1969): God's my judge. But yes, I have been beaten very much, with sticks, switches, extension cords, shoes, brushes, comb handles, all that type of thing. I've been beat with rulers and, you know, I still resent that. I can recall being a grown man at 25 years old, having an argument, a big argument, fight with my mother because I remember she used to beat me. And she used to have a saying, too; my mother always used to have a saying, "I brought you into this world, and I'll take you out." And she meant it.

> **Bob** (black male born in 1964): My mother, my mother was OOO! She was something. Belts. Switches. Ashtrays. Pots. Lamps. Anything she could get her hand on, and then she get toe-ta-toe and box us, punch us out…. Knock the hell out you…. She was a little woman … but she knew … she knew we loved her so much that we would never, you know, that we respect her.

Foul and abusive language was also common in these distressed households. Often foul language would erupt into a full-fledged beating.

> **Kiki** (black female born in 1981): Curses? Oh, her mouth is filthy. She [my mother] got a mouth like a sailor. She curse[s] all the time. That's how I learned how to curse, listening to the grownups. All of them, all the grownups curse.

> **Candy** (black female born in 1969): You know, if things were going bad between her and the boyfriend or she was being stressed out a lot, she would react more harshly to me…. It was just the way she would talk, like really nasty, really, you know, um, degrading the way that she would talk to me. And sometimes, yeah, it would lead to a, um, a beating.

Assault by fathers and mother's other partners—Male partners generally established their authority through the routine use of violence and the continual threat of its use (see Dunlap, Golub et al., 2004). This was especially the case when a male was in a household with children who were not his biological children. These boyfriends were often viewed as interlopers by the children and not accorded the same respect as the children's

biological parents. Children lived in fear for the pain and injury their mother's boyfriends would inflict on them.

> **Mike** (black male born in 1964): Oh, man, I got beatings, beatings, beatings. They were really tough beatings. And I got hit with everything from racing car tracks to, um, those sticks under the bed … slats. Yes, those. I just got hit with everything. Wilhelmina and Kinetta's father. He was the one that hit me with the slats from under the bed…. But I mean, he used to come really too close, you know. He used to really get close to hurting me.

> **J.T.** (black male born in 1952): He started beating her [the mother] and then started beating us…. He's an animal, you understand what I'm saying?…. Yeah, that's what he was a[n] animal. That nigger didn't give a fuck about nothing or nobody! All he cared about was a shot [of heroin]. When he got that dope in him, he couldn't even walk. … We didn't have to worry about him. When he get him a good hit of dope, that nigger be sitting down all night. [In retaliation, we would] spit in his Kool-Aid. … We put glass in his Kool-Aid. We tried to kill that mother fucker. … That's right. Anytime he asked us to go get him some Kool-Aid, we spit in it, you know what I'm saying. We put things in his food … glass and shit, crushed up glass. We wanted to kill that mother.

> **Red Man** (black male born in 1953): [My mother'S boyfriend] took a lot of this stuff out on [me]…. I asked my mother that. … One time I had to confront her on the reasons that I had to be tortured and beaten like that, and I asked her, you know, there was Jimmy there was Daniel. Why did I have to take it?…. He beat me naked, tied to beds, iron cords, hung out windows, gags, stuff like that. … I think his drinking is nothing but an excuse for him to do pain and mean things. I think it's just an excuse. I don't think he was that much of a drinker. I just think he would use that.

In Jennifer's case, it was her stepmother who abused the children.

> **Jennifer** (black female born in 1964): Oh hell, yeah. My father, like I said, one or two times that he put it on me but my stepmother used to like punch me. She had this fucking ring. I wish I could get that ring; I'd burn it. She used to have this ring that she would put on her finger, and she would just punch you on your arm…. It was a nice ring my father bought her … but she knew if she'd punch us it would bruise us. She'd punch me in my arm and stuff like that, and I wasn't really even bad, you know what I'm saying. I was never bad. I was the merit of the family; you know what I'm saying. The little horned rimmed shits, always got my head in a book, you know what I'm saying. She ain't got no cause to be hitting on me and stuff like that.

A beating is a culturally-defined concept—When asked, "Did you receive beatings while growing up in your household?" more than half of the subjects responded affirmatively. However, further discussion revealed this greatly underestimates the true percentage. Many of the respondents distinguished the physical punishments they received as distinct from being beaten. Some legitimated their punishment as spankings. This is their emic or insider's perspective on the experience.

> **Denise** (black female born in 1983): I never got a beating. I never got a beating in my whole, entire life. I never got a beating. I might have gotten popped and spanked but I never got a beating.

> **Peaches** (black female born in 1951): And I was sleeping on the cot, and she told me close my eyes and go to sleep, but I couldn't just go to sleep real fast like that,

so when she saw my eyes was open and I wasn't asleep she came over and [yells] "Didn't I tell you to go to sleep!" And started yelling and screaming and spanking me…. Well, this particular time she had a thin strap and she hit me across my back real hard and I fell off the bed screaming and screaming in agony.

Qman (black male born in 1983): A beatin' is a beat down, fists flyin' and beatin. A spankin' is a belt and you [get hit] they tell you don't do it again and that's it.

Most subjects believed "smacked" or "popped" did not qualify as a beating. Qman personally differentiated a spanking from a beating. However, in describing his experience he revealed that a belt was used for spankings. Scholars of child abuse would clearly identify this behavior as a beating and abusive. Thus, although some subjects replied "no," when talking with them further, they revealed that they were routinely assaulted by their parents, they just did not classify the experience as a beating. Violent interactions were so common that subjects did not dwell on being beaten as a child. The quotes below suggest the subjects blocked out painful childhood memories that could be easily recalled and defined as a beating.

A (black male born in 1954): No, not really [I never was beaten]. … I'd get smacked. That was it. And that was mainly from Ma. I didn't want Pops to get into it, you know. I really didn't want him to get into it, so … they'd threaten to kill you, but they ain't never did anything like that. I didn't get whipped with it, because I ran, but, um, one day my mother got so mad at me she went to hit me with a baseball bat. You know, but as far as getting beaten like that, maybe when I was a little kid I got beaten with a belt. If I think back, but as far as that goes, I guess my mother would smack me or something like that.

Love and violence—Most often, children accepted the abuse from their mothers and did not try to retaliate, even if they were physically capable to, even after they had grown into young adults. This was out of respect and love. They reported that they knew their mother loved them. This same respect was generally accorded to their biological father, but not to their mother'S successive boyfriends or necessarily to their stepmothers. Moreover, subjects accepted that being smacked by their mother was part of being a child. In justifying their punishments, they came to define parental assault as subculturally normative and even a mark of caring and attentive parenting. Chilton had initially reported that he was not beaten as a child. His subsequent remarks clearly revealed that not only was he severely assaulted but that he accepted that he might have been better off had he been whipped more often and harder.

Chilton (black male born in 1958): Uh, we got smacked, we got popped every now and then but like whippings, nah. Which we might have been lacking. That might have been the better for all of us…. [My mother used to hit me with] a washing machine cord, um, a[n] iron cord, extension cord. I used to have welts [all over my body]. I mean big welts, where I had to wear jeans to cover up. And they used to be so sore.

Numerous respondents felt that they deserved the beatings they received from their parents. They reported that they were "bad" and that their parents beat them because they loved them. For them, abuse and love are closely connected when it came to their parents. However, this confounds our etic or official outsider's view of the severity of the assault with their emic or insider's perspective on their parents' affection.

Koco (black female born in 1971): [Interviewer: So, you deserved the beatings, you think.] Yep. [Interviewer: So you said you had a smart mouth; you wouldn't listen;

you'd look at her crazy if she asked you to do anything.] Yeah. I just thought everything was about me, like I didn't have to do anything.

Mike: Well, I was always getting the whipping for a reason. I knew what I was getting the whipping for most of the time, so … I ain't really had too much, um, hate for him. I mean, at the time of the whipping, yeah, I used to hate him for that. But afterwards, no. [Interviewer: You felt that you were deserving of them.] Yeah, sometimes.

Toughening children up—Many inner-city parents seek to guard their children from future perils through beatings. Life in the inner-city is violent. As they grow, children need to be prepared for violence from peers, violence associated with illicit street industries (i.e., drug sales, sex work, and robbery), potentially violent interactions with police, and violence associated with serving time. In this manner, violent experiences within the home can be viewed as effectively preparing inner-city youths for their lives ahead. Conversely, it also helps assure that inner-city life will remain violent by reifying subcultural norms. The ecological violence these youths face provides subcultural legitimacy to expressions such as, "I beat you because I love you," "If I didn't love you I would not care what you do," and "It hurts me more than it hurts you." Within this subcultural experience, physical assault not only serves as a punishment, but also further acts to toughen children providing them with the discipline they will need in their futures.

Harriet (black female born in 1962): We had, she would, every time she would beat me, and her thing was man, she would beat you, she would like, shut-up, smile, you know (laughs loudly). You never, you better not cry, and the more you cry, you know, the more I would cry, the more she would hit me. So, it was like, you know, I couldn't understand, you know, she was like if you don't shut up, I'm, I'm gonna beat you again. And my thing was if you would stop beatin' me, maybe I would stop cryin'. But, you know, to her it was like, didn't I say shut up? And still hittin' me. And then, she, oh, oh, you want something to cry for.

Often the beatings were severe. As indicated here however, Harriet like others learned to accept violence, to take it, to allow it to happen, and to "keep quiet about what is taking place." She has to receive it and keep going as if it does not matter and or is not taking place. She learned to ignore the pain.

Koco: My mother beat me almost every week. … Oh, I was nine, ten. I just got in a lot of trouble … every week. She'd drag me down the stairs. My mother has messed my poor body up. Yep, I have bruises to this day. Like this on my arm … [from a] curtain rod.

Despite their injuries, children were generally not taken to the hospital for medical care. Rather, they would be expected to tough it out, perhaps with the aid of a home treatment.

Susan (black female born in 1968): Oh, God…. See the scar on the top of my eye, here? My mother did that to me. My mother was the … was the disciplinary parent … and on Fridays I would have to soak shirts and panties and wash them and hang them up…. Me and my two sisters, we had to find a certain amount of panties, a certain amount of shirts, and just this Saturday I just didn't feel like doing it and I didn't do it. My mother got a hold of bed slat under the bed…. Yes, from under the bed. Next thing I knew she's, you know, she went right across my head. So, um, you know, she, she's very, very, she had a very firm iron hand and she used to whip … whip … the shit out of me…. No, she didn't take me to the hospital. … She crushed some aspirin and she shoved it inside the cut, and she took and she squeezed it and she put some garlic over the top of it, and threw a Band-Aid up

there … [gasping sound]. … It was aw[ful]. … I stayed home for, uh, four days cause it was [bleeding]. … It bled for like four days and she would constantly crush the aspirin…. As the days went past it got less and less blood, and that's how it was. No stitches, no hospital.

An official redefinition of child abuse—A few of the subjects recognized that the abuse they received as children was so severe that today the parent would be charged with child abuse. We discuss the implications of more aggressive child welfare policies in the conclusion.

Barbara (black female born in 1965): Yeah, she would tear us up … with belts, whatever she could get her hands on, and it depends on what we did, you know…. To a point it was abusive, to me it was abusive, to beat a child with a shower hose or an extension cord or pick up something and put bruise and marks on a kid, I think that's abusive. You know, children, they deserve to be punish when they do wrong, be discipline[d]. But when it gets to a point when you're hurting a child and leaving marks on him and picking up anything that you can hit him with, I think that's abusive and that what's my mother was about. She took it to the extreme when she beat you, you know, I know for me it was.

Power (black male born in 1951): My father did…. My mother beat me, but she beat me because I was really wrong when she beat me … she wasn't tryin' to kill me. … You understand what I'm sayin. She be me like you `posed to get a beatin'…. That was it. But, uh, my father would beat me, it seemed like to kill me or somethin', you know…. In other words right now today, the beatin' that he gave me back then if he woulda did that today, they woulda locked him up…. You can't do that to kids like that. I mean, you know, it's good to stop doin'. He was tryin' to kill me with a[n] ironin' cord. How you gonna beat me with a[n] ironin' cord.

Pepper (black male born in 1961): And back then, you would get your ass whipped and it won't be no problem. Ain't nothing about BCW or somebody can take you. And I know one day my mother came to school and whipped my ass…. I was in pain. I was ashamed, but I was so [feeling so] bad, people wouldn't laugh. One kid laughed at me and he got beat up, too…. A guy started laughing at me, and I beat him up. I was in pain. He was laughing at me.

The Neighborhood and Processes of Abuse

On the inner city neighborhoods streets, fights, drug use and sales, and police activity were constant. Children were exposed to further ecological violence intermingled with drug use and sales. Moreover, these conditions reified subcultural norms present within the household, suggesting these types of behaviors prevailed throughout the community.

Candy: When we moved to the projects from there, there was a lot more activity in the streets, you know, a lot more people hanging out on the corners 'til late nights. You know, a lot more shady looking businesses and stuff going on; but I was too young to really know what was going on. But you could see that something was going on. And there was more, you know, you would see more police presence. There was more police activity and police cars driving up, and going into people's houses. You didn't know what was the problem, but it was something wrong. And you see more, and as I got older, I began to realize that a lot of guys hanging on the street corners were selling drugs, which I had not known in the beginning, you know. And, um, it was strange, though, because even though I lived in a very rough neighborhood, which was like a Hundred Fifty-Fifth Street and Eighth Avenue, I mean, I guess it would seem rough to outsiders; but it didn't seem rough to me

because I didn't really have too many bad experiences there. I was robbed once of my jacket, in the polo grounds, when they were going through that leather jacket stealing phase years back. A guy pulled a gun on me. There were two guys, and one pulled a gun on me and told me to take off the coat. And I did. And they took it and ran down the stairs, and they were gone. And, um, you know, it didn't seem like a really, really rough neighborhood to me. It really didn't.

Carmen (black female born in 1975): Now, fights, that was what mostly went on. People fight each other. They didn't like this one, or this one didn't getting beat up because they, or a man getting beat up by somebody's sons or daughters because they hitting on the mother. So then the daughter get[s] her friends to beat 'em up. Or, um, but you know, basically fights because fights over people that just don't like each other, little squabbles. No, [there were also] real big, big fights where somebody getting the mess beat out of them, too.

Marie (black female born in 1940): The neighborhood was what, um, crowded…. There was drugs, but I wasn't really noticing that type of stuff. But there was drugs around, which I found out later. A lot of heroin. And then you had the heroin addicts that was breaking into people's houses, but, you know, to get their habit. … And they was shooting craps. People shot craps under the streetlights. And they would run, and the cops would give us the money.

A: The neighborhood used to be basically very nice. I mean, outside the people you used to see nodding and stuff like that, the neighborhood used to be very, very peaceful [and] quiet. Now there's people getting shot all over the place, and things like that. That's how it's changed. You know, but, um, it was really a nice place to live at one time. Around here was really nice.

The household can be seen as preparing children to operate successfully in the street/drug subculture. There is a constant interplay between street life and the household. Parents' violent behavior toward their children may indicate their efforts to prepare them to survive. The first place this is tested outside their household is their neighborhoods.

CONCLUSION

Our social experience is not filled with variables; rather, variables are useful devices for analyzing a few elements at a time providing a skeletal understanding of the human experience. Qualitative research places these elements into the more detailed tapestry of daily experiences, weaves these elements into the underlying social and developmental processes that thread through time, and colors these patterns according to the cultural and subcultural significance with which individuals interpret their experiences. This analysis examined CPA within the lived experiences of inner-city residents who became crack users. In the inner city, CPA and ASA are both commonplace. This finding has important implications regarding research, the interpretation of findings, and policy development for impoverished groups as well as for the general population. The remainder of this conclusion examines these two domains.

Implications for Research on the Inner City

In the inner city, CPA and ASA are supported by prevailing subcultural norms. Indeed, defining these behaviors as "abuse" can be counterproductive to analysis. Abuse represents a mainstream cultural and legal perspective on these activities. However, these perspectives do not necessarily accord with the understandings of the parents, the children, and the substance users themselves. Our study subjects often did not define their childhood experiences as abusive or as being beaten. One subject reported that she was never beaten

despite the fact that she was hit on the head with a slat taken from a bed. Moreover, the CPA endured was often frequent and severe. This has important implications for survey research. This study was able to confirm or revise "variables" such as were you abused as a child through related follow-up questions, subsequent interviews, discussions with relatives, and direct observation. Many subjects initially reported they had not been beaten, but later revealed physical assaults that would be defined within scholarly analytic norms as abuse. This serves as a reminder of the importance of field testing questionnaires with members of all the populations under study. A questionnaire that has been validated for use within more fortunate communities might not yield accurate responses with an inner-city sample.

Subjective definitions may have an even larger impact. The principles of symbolic interactionism hold that subjective experiences have real consequences. Physically and neurologically, being hit on the head probably has the same effect, regardless of whether the victim defines this experience as abuse. However, the emotional impact may be strongly mediated by the Significance the children attach to this experience within their own understanding of the social world in which they live.

Field research into inner-city poverty clearly indicates that CPA is widespread but is not the only problem children face or necessarily the most salient to them. Many respondents had multiple stressors during their childhood years both in their households and in their neighborhoods. Such stressors were so frequent that they were often considered ordinary. In fact, respondents frequently referred to their family experiences and neighborhoods as "good." Accordingly, it seems unlikely that CPA would be the ultimate cause of ASA, post-traumatic stress disorder or any specific negative consequences in adulthood. The pathway is likely to be much more complex, multi-factored, and embedded within prevailing subcultural norms and developmental processes. Additionally, the findings of this study indicate that each respondent's story of CPA, their experience of it, and its significance is unique. This can potentially account for great variation in adult outcomes despite the common subcultural and development structures prevailing.

On the other hand, not being subjected to CPA is uncommon and may be part of a strategy to help development In this environment, a lack of CPA may serve as a protective factor against negative outcomes like ASA. This is merely speculation. Further, research is needed to establish the extent of inner-city youths never subjected to CPA, the nature of any larger protective effort, the significance of these efforts, and their eventual impact on ASA as well as post-traumatic stress disorder and other negative outcomes.

To understand the inner city often requires suspending judgment, at least temporarily. Violence and illicit drug use are widespread and accepted within the prevailing subcultures. Some parents even contend that within their strained circumstances hitting their children is socially functional and that they do it because they love them. We do not wish to endorse such behaviors or interpretations. However, we recognize that this behavior and the norms supporting it are thoroughly entrenched within inner-city subcultures. Simply applying criminal sanctions to a few perpetrators is unlikely to transform the situation. Actually, it might have an opposite effect of emphasizing the cultural difference between inner-city subcultures and more privileged society. Such activity could fuel despair in the inner city over the lack of potential for bettering their situations. Just as data collection and interpretation should be situation specific, we contend that policy initiatives must be local and connected into family's lives. Any initiatives to reduce CPA and its possible impact on ASA in the inner city would need to be embedded within a larger, comprehensive effort to transform prevailing circumstances, change life chances, create belief in those possibilities, and effect new behavioral norms. Such policies or collection of initiatives could lead to new developmental pathways that do not include the destructive practices of CPA and ASA.

Further research and policy efforts also need to take into account the evolving nature of inner-city life. This study examined crack users. However, youths coming of age today are more likely to use marijuana and alcohol (Golub, Johnson, Dunlap, & Sifaneck, 2004; Johnson et al., 2000). These substances are less potent than crack and the subcultural expectations for drug-associated behaviors are less compulsive and violent. In this manner, the nature of ASA has clearly been shifting. The extent of CPA may have also abated as young parents have been leading less violent lives. Accordingly, it would be highly informative to examine the prevalence, severity, and significance of CPA within inner-city households of young parents today. Additionally, there have been institutional changes in policing, welfare, child protection, and other services that may have reduced tolerance for CPA and ASA, even within the inner-city.

Implications for Cross-Sectional Research

This research has highlighted the importance of context for the study of CPA, ASA, and their association. The findings suggest that statistical studies of CPA and ASA should take context of inner-city poverty into account—even studies of the general population. In particular, the CPA-ASA relationship might differ substantially across contexts. CPA may have little impact on subsequent development in the inner-city, where it is unremarkable and accepted by subcultural norms. Under more fortunate and less trauma filled circumstances, it may leave deep emotional and physical scars. A standard statistical technique for dealing with this type of heterogeneity across subpopulations is to analyze them separately. This stands as a potentially productive direction for future work in this area.

Analyses that include both inner-city and more fortunate populations could potentially incur a strong omitted variable bias. Inner-city respondents have a substantially higher prevalence of both CPA and ASA than other populations. Consequently, the data will show a spurious association between the two variables. This is especially important when studying illicit drug users recruited from criminal justice of publicly funded drug treatment programs. These populations include disproportionate percentages of people from the inner city. Further research is needed to identify the extent to which the CPA-ASA correlation diminishes when careful controls for inner-city poverty are included.

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