The Current Status of Etiological Theories in Intrafamilial Child Maltreatment

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Child maltreatment is a major social problem affecting over a million children and their families each year (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1992). Effective treatment development for both perpetrators and victims of this problem rests on the availability of well-articulated and validated theories of etiology. Such theories allow for empirical documentation of causal factors and ultimately, more precisely targeted interventions. The goal of this chapter is to assess progress in the development of etiological models of intrafamilial child maltreatment. The chapter begins with a historical overview of the forces that operated to slow theory building in early phases of this field and ones that are now more fostering of theory development. We then examine the foundations of current theories about each form of child maltreatment, highlighting the definitions and assumptions that models have adopted and the basic dimensions on which they differ. The chapter ends with a preliminary attempt to integrate current theorizing into a meta-model that would be useful in treatment development.
FORCES INFLUENCING MODEL DEVELOPMENT

Society's initial outrage at the identification of child abuse as a social problem impelled it to take legal actions to protect children, but this emotional atmosphere did not encourage careful scientific inquiry into the etiology of the problem (Azar, Fantuzzo, & Twentyman, 1984; Gelles, 1983). Treatment took precedence over defining the disorder and searching for causes, limiting the knowledge base from which model building could take place. The epistemologies and emphases of the disciplines that dominated the field early in its history (law, medicine, and psychodynamic psychiatry) also slowed the development of an empirical knowledge base upon which to build theory.

In the late 1970s, such professionals as social learning theorists, sociologists, and developmental psychologists began to enter the field, bringing strong empirical traditions and rich theoretical backgrounds to bear on the problem. Unfortunately, a lack of research funding hampered their efforts. In addition, many methodological issues from earlier decades remained unresolved (e.g., the lack of operational definitions; Azar, 1988; Plotkin, Azar, Twentyman, & Perri, 1981). Consequently, growth in the field's knowledge base was slow.

Recently, however, the picture has begun to change. The number of maltreated children has startled society, and preliminary solutions have proven to be ineffective (e.g., foster care, legal sanctions). Federal task forces have called for more careful theory-guided research (National Research Council, 1993; The U.S.

Definitions
Assumptions
-Defect
-Deficit
-Disruption
-Mismatch between typical modes of responding and that which is more appropriate or effective in a given situation
Levels of analysis
-Biological
-Personality-emotional
-Experiential-learning
-Societal-cultural
Complexity
-Single factor models
-Lists of factors
-Integrated models
Model form (modified version of Handlon, 1960; Wienar & Cromer, 1967)
-Model 1: Abuse is a class with a single member, this member having a single cause.
-Model 2: Abuse is a class with a single member, having multiple factors constituting the radical cause.
-Model 3: Abuse is a class with several members, all members having the same single cause.
-Model 4: Abuse is a class with several members, each having a single or multiple causes that are not necessarily unique to that member.
-Model 5: Abuse is a class with several members, each member having a single unique cause.
-Model 6: Conditional statements in ordered series predicting points in the development of disorder.

Figure 1. Dimensions on which models differ.