

**A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW OF MARITAL VIOLENCE  
AND THE WOMEN WHO WITNESSED IT DURING THEIR CHILDHOOD YEARS**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the ways in which children are affected by witnessing domestic violence. The literature reviewed shows that witnessing violence against their mother's impacts upon their development in many different ways. The wide-range of problems associated with children exposed to wife abuse, including significant behavioural, emotional and cognitive problems, are described in this study. The outcomes and consequences are also discussed. Children respond to witnessing domestic violence in a variety of ways. These responses are mediated by many factors, for example, their age and gender, the intensity and frequency of the violence, parental responses, levels of family dysfunction, and the psychological disposition of the child. Children's experiences vary according to these many characteristics. This study also examines various theoretical perspectives on exposure to domestic violence. These approaches provide an important framework that contributes to this understanding of this phenomenon. There are many shortcomings in this area research, and an in-depth understanding of the phenomena of witnessing marital violence during childhood is lacking. There is also minimal research examining the long-term consequences of exposure to marital violence, particularly with regard to the way that women's lives are impacted upon as adults.

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## **CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

Wife abuse is a pervasive social problem that occurs throughout the world as well as within South Africa. This form of violence against women needs to be understood within the broader sociopolitical and ideological context within which it takes place as there is a link between societal violence and the violence taking place within the family. The levels of violence in society appear to have a direct effect on the prevalence of wife battering, as well as the extent to which it is sanctioned by society (McKendrick & Hoffman, 1990).

South Africans live in a particularly violent society, where most people experience some form of violence, either directly or indirectly. To the extent that violence is pervasive members of society come to accept it as ordinary, normal, and a legitimate means to resolve conflict. The use of violence is promoted, encouraged, and condoned by society. Under such conditions of overwhelming violence a culture of violence develops. Due to its widespread nature, violent acts no longer produce any sense of indignation, and are accepted as the norm rather than the exception (McKendrick & Hoffman, 1990).

In South Africa the legacy of apartheid has contributed to our society being especially violent. This has resulted in a harsh disrespect for human well being which has become embedded in the way human relationships are structured. In this sociopolitical context, violence is reacted to with more violence, which leads to an intensification of the spiral of violence. Social conditions resulting from apartheid, such as poverty, hardship and divided families gives rise to conditions under which violence flourishes (Mashishi, 1998; McKendrick & Hoffman, 1990).

Due to this link between societal and family violence, the family is not seen as randomly violent (Mashishi, 1998). This does not necessarily expand on why targets of adult domestic abuse are primarily women. This can be explained in terms of the patriarchal structuring of gender relationships in society, where women are accorded subordinate status. By virtue of this they are more vulnerable and at more of a disadvantage within society. Women experience inequalities in relation to men, which is supported by a complex ideological



framework within which the concepts of masculinity and femininity are constructed. Within this framework, men are seen as rational, strong-minded, independent and assertive. Women are seen as inferior, passive and dependent. Masculinity embodies empowerment, whereas the stereotypes of femininity reinforce women's feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability. These ideological constructions make women the obvious targets of domestic abuse (Segal & Labe, 1990).

There is growing concern in South Africa about family violence in its various forms, but in spite of its prevalence domestic violence has not received the necessary attention it deserves. It is often dismissed as a private family matter, or a mere domestic disturbance. People are reluctant to become involved in wife abuse. The victim herself, due to the shame associated with abuse, keeps it a secret, which contributes to it being ignored by society (Mashishi, 1998; Segal & Labe, 1990).

If there is insufficient attention paid to wife battering, the children who are exposed to it within their own families receive even less attention, and the effects on these children are largely ignored. As wife battering is one of the most pervasive forms of violence used against any individual in South Africa (Mashishi, 1998) it may be stated that the witnessing of this phenomena is equally pervasive for those households that have children. Nevertheless, these child witnesses have been described as hidden and invisible. They are consequently neglected by professionals and society, with regard to professional attention, research and interventions (Fantuzzo, Mohr, & Noone, 2000).

Although these children are indirect victims of violence and seldom have their experiences acknowledged, they are extremely vulnerable to what they have witnessed. They are certainly not oblivious to the effects of violence between their parents, and there is evidence that the negative effects on their psychological well being can persist well into adulthood (Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 1997).

Despite there being an increase in the research on violence against women in South Africa (Dangor, 1999) there is a paucity of research on the children who have been exposed to violence in their homes. The significance of their experience has been overlooked or ignored. It is imperative that professionals working in this field, as well as society in general, learn about what these children have gone through, and what issues they are left with, if they want to help them regain a sense of psychological well-being and make meaning of their experiences. In addition it is vital that the long-term consequences of their experiences be researched and documented in order to gain a more complete picture of the impact of witnessing parental violence, and to determine in what ways the adult lives of these children remain affected.

## **1.2 MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY**

Research on domestic violence has largely focused on the experiences of abused women with the impact on the children in the family going unnoticed. The effects on, and personal experiences of, children who have witnessed domestic violence in their families has not been adequately researched. Not only has this left us with little information about these consequences, but this has also contributed to a negating of these children's experiences and the serious impact this has had on their lives.

While many children observe violence in their homes little is known of the effects of these experiences on these unintended victims. The short- and long-term consequence of witnessing parental violence on the individual's development is a neglected area of study, but one that is in serious need of attention.

Witnessing marital violence is an extremely traumatic event for a child, and is described as a form of abuse in itself. While not being the direct victim, exposure to violence between parents can have consequences that not only persists into adulthood, but may be seen to shape the type of individuals they are likely to become. Research on this topic would therefore lead to better understanding of the pathways and trajectories that are created and thereby how the lives of these individuals are shaped.

This study is concerned with the children who witness the abuse of their mothers by their fathers or their mother's male partners. As this paper will attempt to show exposed children are negatively affected in many different ways and there are significant long-term consequences. Despite the high prevalence of children's exposure to this form of family violence the subject has received little attention. This is especially true in South Africa. This neglect needs to be addressed. This mini-dissertation, on the subject of witnessing domestic violence during childhood, hopes to begin to give this problem the consideration that it deserves.

This study also serves as the starting point of the literature review chapter of a doctoral dissertation. The proposed doctoral dissertation will explore the long-term consequences for women who witnessed domestic violence during their childhoods. This is an area that is in urgent need of attention, especially within the South African context.

## **1.3 AIM OF THE STUDY**

This mini-dissertation will explore the ways in which domestic violence affects the children who witness it. This study proposes to provide an in-depth, critical review of existing research, literature, and theoretical

frameworks of the effects of growing up in a context where domestic violence was witnessed. Through this study the researcher will attempt to illustrate what children experience when witnessing wife abuse, the nature and extent of the short and long-term consequences and the theoretical explanations offered in the literature of these effects.

The study will be conducted with a view to uncovering evidence in the literature on the long-term consequences of witnessing domestic violence, particularly with regard to the impact on women. Furthermore, critically examining existing literature, research and theoretical frameworks would illuminate the shortcomings and highlight the areas in need of further research and exploration. In addition, this mini-dissertation hopes to locate the witnessing of wife abuse within the South African context as far as possible. As there are no comprehensive and specific studies on this topic from a psychological point of view, within a South African setting, the author will draw on other relevant South African research in order to contextualise this phenomenon within the South African context.

The aims of the study are as follows:

1. To make visible the problem of witnessing domestic violence by children.
2. To explore the existing empirical research and theories on those who witnessed violence between their parents, during childhood.
3. To look at the short and long-term impact of witnessing spousal abuse on these children.
4. To look specifically at the literature on the long-term effects on women who have had this experience.
5. To identify the value of the available literature, as well as the shortcomings. Future approaches to research in the area of the long-term consequences for women of witnessing marital violence as children will also be proposed.
6. To discuss the South African context with regard to witnessing domestic violence.

The study has relevance in so far as it hopes to present an overview of the effects of witnessing domestic violence and the theories that are utilised in the literature to explain this. The study hopes to not only highlight what is available in terms of research findings, but to point out what is not there, for example the lack of research within the South African context.

#### **1.4 OVERVIEW OF MINI-DISSERTATION**

The chapters of the mini-dissertation will be structured along the following lines:

Chapter 1 will focus on introducing the reader to the importance of the problem of children witnessing violence between their parents, specifically father to mother violence. This chapter will also discuss the motivation and aims of this thesis.

Chapter 2 will discuss terms, definitions and the statistics surrounding domestic violence and the witnessing thereof. An attempt will be made to make the concepts and statistics relevant to the South African context.

Chapter 3 will present the various theoretical approaches and models of childhood exposure to interparental violence that are available in the literature. These are Posttraumatic Stress Theory, Attachment Theory, Object Relations Theory, Systems Theory, The Family Disruption Hypothesis, The Intergenerational Transmission of Violence, The Ecological Model, and Feminist Theory.

In Chapter 4 the effects of witnessing marital violence on children will be reviewed. These effects include internalising and externalising disorders, as well as social competency and cognitive and academic performance.

Chapter 5 deals with factors that mediate and moderate the effects of domestic violence on children who witness it between their parents. These factors include individual developmental factors, family factors, and situational and contextual factors.

In Chapter 6 research on the long-term consequences of exposure is examined, with an emphasis on the consequences for females who are now in adulthood.

Chapter 7 looks at the shortcomings of the existing research, including methodological limitations. And the final Chapter presents the conclusion to the critical literature review, and makes recommendations for future research on the topic under study.

## **CHAPTER 2 EXPOSURE TO MARITAL VIOLENCE**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

Although there have been attempts to raise the profile of domestic violence, it is a largely hidden problem that is enshrouded in many myths and misconceptions. This is especially true for the witnessing of domestic

violence by children, where even less is known about the experience or effects (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the nature and extent of witnessing wife battering by the children in the families within which this occurs. In order to do this wife abuse will need to be defined and described, as well as what is understood by childhood exposure to domestic violence. In addition, the incidence and prevalence of domestic violence and the witnessing of it will be discussed.

As most of the literature and research on the witnessing of wife abuse is not situated within the South African context, an attempt will be made to establish relevance to the South African situation and to try to understand how this particular context interacts with the witnessing of domestic violence in unique ways. This will be done by drawing on other studies to contextualise this phenomenon. It is important to acknowledge that violence against women in South Africa reflects what has been termed the culture of violence that is endemic to our society. In our society violence is so widespread and entrenched as to appear normative, even sanctioned. With little outrage evident, violence, including domestic violence, is more tolerated than it is challenged (Vogelman & Eagle, 1991).

Within South Africa violence against women cannot be separated from the social and political background that has apartheid as its legacy. Women abuse in South Africa needs to be viewed against a background within which there are specific race, class and gender relations. The witnessing of domestic violence by children takes place against the same sociopolitical background. The devastating impact of apartheid on family life in South Africa needs to be taken into account when looking at the effects of exposure to domestic abuse within this context (Vogelman & Eagle, 1991).

Despite violence against women in South Africa going largely unrecognised and under-reported it is still acknowledged as an extensive and serious problem that is an issue of concern for all South Africans. Due to the lack of national prevalence studies, accurate statistics are unavailable and it is therefore difficult to provide definitive statements on the prevalence of wife abuse in South Africa (Dangor, Hoff & Scott, 1996; Segal & Labe, 1990).

## **2.2 THE NATURE OF VIOLENCE**

Violence between humans is as old as humanity itself. It has its roots in the earliest myths, stories and historical accounts. As it is a purely human phenomenon it is deeply embedded within interpersonal and

intergroup interaction. While violence appears to be universal and not unique to our particular time and place, there are certain times and places that violence does escalate in severity and frequency. South Africa is at present, and has been for several decades, a particularly violent society (McKendrick & Hoffman, 1990).

Violence can be defined as the use of force to harm, injure, or abuse other individuals. It may be described as including not only physical assaults but ways that also cause harm mentally and emotionally. Acts of violence directed at another person deliberately invade their personal space, as well as their rights. But one needs to be cautious when using definitions as what constitutes violence is in many ways a social construction. Acts of violence may be seen as acceptable and legitimate in one culture but may be unsanctioned and intolerated in another (McKendrick & Hoffman, 1990).

McKendrick and Hoffman (1990) describe several common features of human violence, which are present regardless of the context within which they occur. They postulate that all these features share the characteristics of conflict, which, if destructively managed can result in violence. A predominant feature of violence is the use of force, displayed in strength or power, which may be mental or physical. Fear, as a result of the use of force, is present in violent episodes. All acts of violence feature perpetrators and victims. Violence can also be seen as a way of communication, to convey a message to the individual concerned. Violent acts may be planned or may occur spontaneously and impulsively. Any act of violence is a violation of the dignity and rights of the victim. These acts deliberately invade the personal and physical space of the person. The settings within which violence takes place can be public or private. Wife abuse, for example, takes place within a domestic setting. Secrecy is therefore likely to accompany violence in such settings. This is accompanied by a reluctance to overstep the sanctity of the family and interfere in what may be seen as a private issue. State violence may also be shrouded in secrecy because of matters of national security. Violence is predominantly a learned response. Through social learning or cognitive restructuring, desensitisation to violence can occur. Patterns of violent behaviour may be repeated inter-generationally. Ideologising conflict usually leads to its intensification. Should violence be advocated as a means to resolve conflict, it would then be likely to escalate.

The authors stress that conflict should not be confused with violence. While conflict denotes a conflict of interests or difference of opinion it should not be equated with violence. To equate conflict with violence could reinforce violence as an acceptable means of conflict management and resolution (McKendrick & Hoffman, 1990).

## 2.3 MARITAL VIOLENCE DEFINED

Women abuse is difficult to define as it is open to subjective interpretation and covers a wide range of actions. This has led to considerable ambiguity and inconsistency with regard to definitions and meanings of domestic violence. Definitions disagree on many areas, such as the type of acts that constitute violence or abuse and the types of relationships that can be considered domestic. Difficulties in operationalising abuse, especially psychological and emotional abuse, has restricted satisfactory research in this area (Segal & Labe, 1990).

Physical violence has been the commonly accepted research standard in the area of domestic abuse. This would include a range of behaviours such as pushing, slapping, beatings, and forced sex, to assaults with deadly weapons. Expanded definitions include threats and intimidation, emotional and verbal abuse, harassment, and humiliation. Violence takes place between intimate partners regardless of whether or not they are legally married (Brewster, 2002; McGee, 2000).

Domestic violence received an official definition with the Domestic Violence Act of 1998. This definition describes domestic violence as including: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional, verbal and psychological abuse; economic abuse; intimidation; harassment; stalking; damage to property; entry into the home without permission; and any other abusive, controlling, behaviour (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).

Violence against women is best conceptualised as existing on a continuum. This is for two reasons:

1. This identifies what is common to various types of violence, for example, men's use of threat, force, intimidation and abuse, to control women; and
2. This implies that there is a range of abuse. Acts of violence cannot be isolated into discretely defined categories as these behaviours overlap and blend into each other (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).

The terms *wife abuse*, *wife battering*, *wife assault*, *spousal abuse*, *domestic violence*, *interparental violence*, *marital violence* and *violence against women* are used interchangeably throughout this study.

### 2.3.1 MARITAL VIOLENCE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

This section explores what may be unique to woman abuse in South Africa. Park, Fedler and Dangor (2000) comment that apart from the considerable extent of the problem there are other particular manifestations of domestic violence within South Africa. These authors discuss three aspects that help in the understanding of

why domestic violence is so much a part of the South African landscape. These are: (1) the power dynamics within this society; (2) the culture of violence that is apartheid's legacy; and (3) the lag between apartheid's repressive government, and the new democratic means of social control. The old authoritarian mechanisms of control have fallen away, but the new mechanisms of social control, that require the development of internalised morality and independent thinking, have not yet been firmly entrenched.

The broader political, social and historical context within which marital violence takes place needs to be acknowledged in order to understand violence against women in South Africa. Relations between people are structured according to hierarchy and power. Race, gender and class are the determinants of this hierarchy. Black women experience the least power and the most oppression. In South Africa woman abuse needs to be seen against the sociopolitical backdrop of apartheid. The effect its has had on families, particularly the historically disadvantaged groups, needs to be noted (Segal & Labe, 1990).

Women in South Africa are not a homogeneous group. South African women differ in terms of socioeconomic status, skin colour, age, education level, to name just a few factors of differentiation. Gender oppression intersects with other forms of distinction to produce complex patterns of dominance and oppression not only between males and females, but between women themselves (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).

During the apartheid era, violence became a legitimate way to resolve conflict. In so doing it lead to an increase in violence against women and children. Although this country has seen the demise of apartheid, its influence still remains (Motsie, Moore & Goosen, 1996).

Dangor (1999) states that it is time that the relationship between apartheid and the abuse of women is acknowledged. Apartheid created social conditions that contributed to poverty, illness and adversity. It divided families through the migrant labour system, the group areas act, forced removals and states of emergency. This created conditions within which violence thrived. The militarisation and conflict of the apartheid era has also left enduring marks on this nation's psyche. The culture of violence, where violence is seen as a legitimate means of resolving conflict, is one such after effect. This contributes to the high incident of violence against women. Political and criminal violence existing within our society needs to be connected to the less visible, less reported domestic violence taking place within South African families (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).



## **2.4 THE EXTENT OF MARITAL VIOLENCE**

Domestic violence against women is grossly underreported, but is found to be the most common form of family violence worldwide (McGee, 2000; Sudermann & Jaffe, 1999).

Within South Africa women abuse is seen to be an extensive problem. Despite this no official statistics are available, nor have national prevalence studies been conducted. The difficulties in obtaining accurate figures has been exacerbated by the bureaucratic fragmentation caused by apartheid (Vogelman & Eagle, 1991).

One of the only official means by which information on the extent of wife abuse can be recorded is through the reporting of incidents of abuse. But research has shown that the majority of abused women do not report their assaults. This confirms society's assumptions that domestic abuse is a rare occurrence and reinforces disbelief in the pervasiveness of the problem (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).

Underreporting occurs for several reasons, such as: society's acceptance of violence as normative, a lack of confidence in the efficacy of the police, difficulty in obtaining convictions, the shame felt by women who are victims of violence, dependence on batterers for economic support, and fear of retribution on the part of the abusers (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

In addition, because no crime called 'domestic violence' exists, there is no means of ascertaining how many cases are reported to the SAPS annually. Park, Fedler and Dangor (2000) comment that the lack of reliable data make it difficult to know whether wife abuse has increased or decreased over time.

Despite these difficulties there have been efforts to obtain more accurate figures. It has been estimated that one in four women are regularly assaulted by their partners in South Africa (Motsei, Moore, & Goosen, 1996). This means that more than one million women are battered each year, and with most households having children, this gives some indication as to how many children are exposed to domestic violence.

## **2.5 EXPOSURE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING CHILDHOOD**

As difficult as it is to define wife abuse, it is often more difficult to define witnessing domestic violence. Exposure is a broad term and refers to the many ways in which children may be exposed to aggressive and violent behaviours between their parents. Any definition must include all the various ways that children can be exposed to, and experience, these violent events.

Witnessing violence is most often described as being within visual range of the event and seeing it take place. For example being an “eyewitness”. But there are several additional ways that children can be exposed to domestic violence. Apart from directly seeing or hearing assaults, children also witness its aftermath. This would include, for example, seeing their mother with a black eye the next day, or seeing toys or household object broken or destroyed (Edelson, 1999; Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002; Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Witnessing can also be described as vicariously experienced violence. Children may or may not witness the violence directly, but are keenly aware that it has taken place, and are profoundly affected by that knowledge (Berman, 2000). Exposure to domestic violence can be conceptualised more broadly as having to live in an unstable and violent environment (Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 1997).

It is a misconception that children are not aware of the assaults that take place on their mothers (Humphreys, 1993; Sudermann & Jaffe, 1999). It is seldom possible to conceal domestic abuse, and children witness much of what their parents believe has been kept hidden from them. While most parents minimise or deny the presence of their children during violent episodes, when interviewing the children themselves, most can describe in detail the nature of the incidents their parents were unaware they had witnessed (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

It is a difficult task to explore the impact of a traumatic event on a child’s development without a thorough understanding of exactly what that event is. Amongst other things these children may witness seeing their father hit, punch, slap, strangle or try to suffocate their mothers. They may even hear him threaten to kill her. They may see things thrown at her, see her being pushed around, pinned down, threatened with weapons or having weapons used against her. Some children witness their mothers being raped by their fathers. These children are therefore exposed to extreme levels of violence (McGee, 2000).

Fantuzzo, Mohr and Noone (2000) found that children in violent households are not just witnessing abuse, but may be involved in the violence in a variety of different ways. They may see the aftermath of the violence, which may include seeing their mother injured, or needing assistance. They may be the ones who need to call for help, or find themselves involved in police intervention. Some may be moved to a shelter. Children may also be more directly involved. They could themselves be hit, threatened, taken hostage, forced to watch the assaults, or even participate in the violence. In more subtle ways they could be used to manipulate the partner (Edelson, 1999).

Children witness many other forms of violent behaviour. This includes seeing their fathers kick or punch doors and windows, break toys, throw furniture or other objects around, even injure family pets. Witnessing such destruction can leave them extremely aware of the power and strength of the abuser, especially in relation to themselves as small children. These children see the facial expressions that accompany the violence and hear the verbal abuse of their mothers. Some children comment that hearing the violence is worse than seeing it, as they do not know what is taking place (McGee, 2000).

Exposure of children to domestic violence can be seen as a form of psychological and emotional abuse. It is a traumatic event to witness domestic violence. The child experiences an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, shock and fear. They feel a strong sense of insecurity as they are not sure how to cope or behave. They may also feel responsible for the events they witness. Uncontrollable violence can have serious and detrimental psychological consequences, even if the child is not the direct victim (Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 1997; Fantuzzo, Mohr, & Noone, 2000; Maker, Kimmelmeier & Peterson, 1998; Peled & Davis, 1995).

### **2.5.1 EXPOSURE TO MARITAL VIOLENCE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT**

In South Africa there is a lack of awareness that children who witness domestic violence can suffer adverse short and long-term effects. The emotional and behavioural problems that result can be directly linked to the effects and aftermath of this trauma (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).

There are structural conditions specific to the South African situation that increases the likelihood that violence between parents will be witnessed. For certain population groups poverty, housing shortages and large families have resulted in overcrowding. In many families there is a lack of privacy in their homes, for example, children will often have to share a bedroom with their parents. Should aggressive conflict take place these children are much more likely to be exposed to the violence between their parents, and they have fewer places to go to in order to escape or feel safe (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).

### **2.6 STATISTICS ON THE PREVALENCE OF EXPOSURE TO MARITAL VIOLENCE**

Fundamental to understanding children's exposure to domestic violence is an accurate understanding of the scope of the problem. Information on incidence and prevalence is essential as a basis from which to meaningfully examine the many ways in which children are exposed to this type of violence in their families

and the varied ways this can impact upon their development. Reliable estimates of the extent of the problem are also critical with regard to intervention and prevention (Brewster, 2002; Fantuzzo, Mohr & Noone, 2000; Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002).

Although precise figures are not available and the numbers may never be accurately known, there are some commonly accepted estimates. Figures available for the United States suggest that between 3.3 and 10 million children witness domestic violence each year (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999). According to Park, Fedler and Dangor (2000) statistics from the United States of America show that as many as 87% of the children of battered women witness the abuse. As discussed above, the witnessing may take a range of forms, from directly seeing the violence, to hearing it and seeing the aftermath.

A study of marital violence amongst Coloured couples in the Cape area, conducted by Lawrence (1984, in Mohammed, 2003), found that in 86% of the incidents of violence occurring between parents, their children were present.

Fantuzzo, Mohr and Noone (2000) comment that the commonly quoted figure of 3.3 million is inadequate as it was derived from the first National Family Violence Survey (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, in Fantuzzo, Mohr & Noone 2000), conducted more than twenty years ago. This survey is also limited by the fact that it excluded children under the age of three, and families in which the abused mother and the abusive father were divorced.

Not only do estimates vary, but an underestimation of the extent of the problem is likely. There are several reasons for this: Firstly, the numbers may include only incidents of serious violence, defined as violence likely to cause injury. Secondly, some widely quoted studies exclude families with children under three years of age, and families where the parents were separated or divorced, but where violence may still be taking place. Thirdly, the private nature of domestic violence makes accurate assessment of the problem difficult. It is seldom directly observed, and obtaining substantiating accounts of witnessing is challenging. Many mothers are reluctant to disclose the extent of the abuse they are experiencing for fear of being separated from their children (Ammerman & Hersen, 1999; Edelson, 1999; Fantuzzo, McDermott & Lutz, 1999).

Additional reasons for underestimating the phenomenon are, forgetting as a coping mechanism, fear of losing one's children, fear of retribution from the abuser, women learning to view their experiences as unimportant, fear of not being believed and understood, and feeling ashamed of the way they are treated by their partner (McGee, 2000).

There is an urgent need for national survey data and analysis regarding abused women and their children who witness the violence. Because South Africa does not have its own data, the interventions and explanations that are developed are based on US or UK statistics, which could prove inappropriate for the requirements specific to this country (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).

## **2.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter examined the definitions and terminology relating to domestic violence and the witnessing of it by children. The term abuse, although difficult to define and open to subjective interpretation, was accepted to mean physical, verbal, emotional, sexual and / or psychological abuse, coercion, degradation, and economic deprivation. The terms ‘abuse’, ‘battery’, and ‘violence’ are used interchangeably for the purposes of this study.

Definitions of witnessing domestic violence included the many ways in which children may be exposed to violent behaviours between their parents. This would include the various ways that children can be exposed to and experience these violent events, such as being an eyewitness, hearing the violence and or seeing the aftermath.

Throughout the chapter an attempt was made to situate domestic violence and exposure to it within a South African context, demonstrating that we live within a culture of violence. The history of apartheid was mentioned and its radiating effects, ranging from violence occurring within wider society, to violence occurring within the home. The tolerance and sanctioning of violence was also discussed, as was the private nature of the family and how this would contribute to domestic abuse and the witnessing of it being hidden and silenced.

This chapter also looked at the statistics on wife abuse and the witnessing of wife abuse. Situating this phenomenon within a South African context acknowledges the aftermath of apartheid, whereby accurate figures are unavailable. Explanations to account for the difficulty in determining the true extent of wife abuse and the witnessing of it by children were proposed.

A number of theoretical perspectives are drawn on in the literature to explain the effects of domestic violence on children exposed to it. These theories provide frameworks within which to understand why, and in what

ways, children suffer consequences if they are exposed to wife abuse. In the next chapter we turn to the following approaches and the ways that they account for the problems of child witnesses: Posttraumatic Stress Theory, Attachment Theory, Object Relations Theory, Systems Theory, The Family Disruption Hypothesis, The Intergenerational Transmission of Violence, The Ecological Model, and Feminist Theory.

## **CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS FOR THE IMPACT OF EXPOSURE TO MARITAL VIOLENCE**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

Various theoretical models have emerged to explain children's responses to domestic violence exposure. These theories are necessary tools to assist in understanding the effects of domestic violence on children and the changes in their developmental trajectories. They serve as ways to interpret what is known about exposure, and provide a framework for increased understanding of this phenomenon (Humphreys, 1993; Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Most aspects of a child's development are impacted on and disrupted by exposure to domestic violence. It is therefore difficult for any one theoretical perspective to adequately account for all of these difficulties and the diverse range of adjustment problems that children display. The varying approaches highlight different aspects of the problem, providing insight into different areas (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

The aim of this chapter is to explore and discuss the theories of witnessing domestic violence by children. The following theories will be reviewed: Posttraumatic Stress Theory, Attachment Theory, Object Relations Theory, Systems Theory, The Family Disruption Hypothesis, The Intergenerational Transmission of Violence, The Ecological Model, and Feminist Theory. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss theories of wife abuse, and the discussion will be confined to theories as they explain the effects of domestic violence on the child witnesses.

### **3.2 POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS THEORY**

Observing violence between parents is a traumatic event for a child. This exposure presents a risk for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to develop. Recent research has gone as far as to establish PTSD as a highly likely outcome of exposure to domestic violence (Kerig, Fedorowicz, Brown & Warren, 2000; Lehmann, 1997; Peled, Jaffe & Edelson, 1995; Sudermann & Jaffe, 1999).

Kerig et al. (2000) comment that the most comprehensive models for understanding the impact of trauma on children, converge on several important themes. Firstly, they are integrative, taking into account the child as a whole person and considering multiple domains of functioning. Secondly the child is considered within the context of their family, peers and society. Thirdly, the theories are developmental and consider children's interpretations and responses to trauma at different ages and stages of development. Developmental psychopathology may be drawn on to enhance understanding.

Rossmann and Ho (2000) describe children growing up in violent families as living in "a type of war zone" (p.85). There are times when they can predict an assault between parents, and other times when the attack is unexpected. This may result in them feeling helpless and fearful. Dutton (2000) postulates that seeing a parent strike another parent may destroy the belief that their parents are able to provide protection and make life secure and safe.

There are four criterion factors involved in PTSD in children (Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002):

**Criterion A.** Exposure to a traumatic event: The child will have been exposed to events that are threatening and potentially harmful to him or herself or those close to them.

**Criterion B.** The re-experiencing of symptoms: These may be intrusive recollections, as the child relives and sees the violence all over again. As this typically occurs in a waking state, the child may feel the event is recurring. The child may also experience nightmares and disrupted sleep patterns.

**Criterion C.** Avoidance symptoms: The child may avoid thoughts and feelings, as well as activities and places that are connected to the event. The child may withdraw or even dissociate.

**Criterion D.** Arousal: This refers to the physiological outcomes of the exposure. Symptoms are disturbed sleep, problems concentrating, irritability and outbursts of anger. There are two primary features of this criterion, the startle response and hypervigilance.

**Criteria E and F** refer to the duration and disturbance of symptoms. Duration is divided into acute and chronic, and disturbance examines social and other domains of functioning.

Age and developmental differences play a large role in determining the extent of the PTSD symptoms the child will exhibit. It appears as if younger children, due to their level of development, have the greatest difficulty interpreting the violence and experience the most stress (Lehmann, 1997; Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002).

Kerig et al. (2000) draw attention to developmental differences in the expression of PTSD symptoms across childhood and adolescence. Several dimensions need to be taken into account when assessing the effects of trauma on children. These are the individual characteristics of the child, the nature of the traumatic event, and the child's social environment. These factors interact and each can be a source of risk or protection.

*Child characteristics:* Cognitive, affective, moral, interpersonal and physical areas of functioning may all be affected by the trauma, preventing the child progressing developmentally. Factors involved in children's reactions to trauma are temperament, emotional regulation, self-efficacy and history of prior traumatising. Areas of resiliency and competence, such as coping strategies and self-esteem, need to be identified, as these can moderate the risk involved (Kerig, et al., 2000; Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002).

*Characteristics of the social environment:* The traumatic event can have an indirect impact through its effects on the child's family and community. Protective factors are parental warmth, parental well being, guidance, structure, nurturing and other forms of social and community support (Kerig, et al., 2000; Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002).

*The nature of the traumatic event:* Characteristics of the traumatic event can affect the child's adjustment, for example the frequency and duration of the trauma. Long-standing and chronic stressors have more negative impact. The proximity of the trauma is also significant. Distress is greater the closer the child is to the event or to the perpetrator and victim. This may be physical or psychological closeness (Kerig, et al., 2000; Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002).

*Type I and Type II traumas:* The characteristics of the traumatic experience needs to be assessed to determine the type of trauma (Kerig, et al., 2000; Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002).



A Type I trauma is usually a once off, unexpected event and the stressor is outside of the family, for example, a natural disaster or an accident. Type I traumas are once off, sudden and unexpected. They result in distinct, complete memories. Symptoms such as repetition, avoidance, and hyper-arousal fit the *Diagnosics and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) (DSM-IV) criteria (Kerig, et al., 2000).

A Type II trauma is one of exposure to long-lasting, chronic and repeated events. Memories of these events may be blurred. The associated symptoms are denial, dissociation, withdrawal, absence of feeling, a sense of rage, unremitting sadness, and self-destructive behaviour. These symptoms are more subtle and may not be as well captured by the DSM-IV (1994) criteria. It is therefore important to be aware of the markers of Type II traumatisation as they may go unnoticed (Kerig, et al., 2000).

Type II traumas may follow from stressors that take place in secrecy and silence, such as domestic violence. This would contribute to the likelihood that such traumas might be missed. This is of particular concern given that the long-term consequences of Type II traumas can be severe (Kerig, et al., 2000).

Other important characteristics are: the timing, frequency and duration of the traumatic experience; the extent and degree of exposure; how the trauma is resolved; the age at which it begins; the relationship of the perpetrator to the victim and the witness; the responses of those close to the child; and the frequency of reminders of the trauma. Other significant characteristics of the trauma that relate to the development of PTSD are: whether human aggression is involved, the extent of threat to self or significant others, for example one's mother; the potential for loss or disruption; physical injury; destruction to property; and how much of this has been experienced first-hand. The characteristics described above are frequently present in wife battering (Kerig, et al., 2000; Lehmann, 1977; Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002).

The DSM-IV (1994) places the symptoms of PTSD into three distinct clusters: (1) Re-experiencing; (2) Avoidance and numbing; and (3) Increased arousal.

*Re-experiencing:* This is the only cluster of symptoms in which the DSM-IV (1994) recognises differences between adults and children. While adults may have recollections that include images and thoughts of the event, children's intrusive recollections often take the form of behaviours such as repetitive play about the traumatic event. Children are also more likely to have night terrors or frightening dreams (Kerig, et al., 2000).

*Avoidance and numbing:* Children are more likely to “space out” than make actual efforts to avoid thoughts and feelings associated with the event. In addition, instead of total amnesia for the event, children display cognitive-perceptual difficulties, such as misperceiving the timing and sequencing of the traumatic events, a phenomena that is referred to as “time skew”. Futurelessness is another symptom of trauma specific to children. They may experience a sense of a foreshortened future, and consequently may not expect to have a normal life-span (Kerig, et al., 2000).

*Dissociative symptoms:* Some of the symptoms of avoidance such as spacing out, withdrawal, and confusion may need special attention, as they suggest the child is possibly using dissociation as a defensive strategy. This may lead to serious adjustment problems. It is important to note developmental differences with regard to dissociation. While adults may report dissociative flashbacks, children may appear inattentive, seem unaware of what is happening around them, and seem to be in a daze or a trance. When this occurs children may lose track of time, and become unresponsive to external stimuli. There is the possibility that some of these symptoms may go unnoticed. Being tuned-out, for example, may be interpreted as the child’s quiet nature and may even be misinterpreted as the child coping well, as they do not seem to be distressed and are not misbehaving. The child themselves may not report that anything is amiss, as the splitting of internal and external experiences is a common defence used by traumatised children. Subtle symptoms such as confusion and forgetfulness could be also overlooked (Kerig, et al., 2000).

*Increased arousal:* When dealing with trauma the mind-body system responds with a fight or flight reaction. Startle responses in children are particularly noticeable (Kerig, et al., 2000).

The trauma of witnessing domestic violence is particularly disturbing for a child as a sense of trust between family members can be destroyed by the violence. This can result in the child experiencing not only an inability to comprehend the event, but could lead to a fragmentation of their sense of self. These events may be so traumatic that they can lead to profound changes in the child, involving their sense of safety, and feelings of security for future relationships. The child’s perceived danger may not only depend on the fear of being harmed, but on the personal meaning that is given to the event (Humphreys, 1993; Mohr & Fantuzzo, 2000).

Children who have suffered from PTSD symptoms face many lingering difficulties, such as, depression, social withdrawal, concentration problems, irritability and hyperarousal. These features may interfere with the child's ongoing functioning and achievement of critical developmental tasks.

### **3.3 AN EMOTIONAL SECURITY HYPOTHESIS**

An attachment-based emotional insecurity hypothesis may help to explain the effects of childhood exposure to domestic violence and children's reactions to adult conflict. This theory suggests that the parent-child bond is interfered with when violence is witnessed, and that parent-child attachment is weakened. Children's reactions, although varied, may best be understood as their attempts to establish, or regain, a sense of emotional security based on their attachments with their caregivers. Defensive reactions towards others are thus attempts by child witnesses to re-establish a sense of emotional security (Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 1997; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Dutton, 2000; Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

The processes of attachment, separation and loss are the means by which bonds of affection are established and broken. Attachment theory proposes that each child creates an internal working model of self and relationships, containing elements of security and insecurity, and this plays an important role in determining a person's attitudes towards relationships across the life span (Bee, 2000).

Bowlby's (in Bee, 2000) attachment theory is based on how infants become emotionally attached to their primary care-givers and become emotionally distressed when separated from them. The infant, separated from its mother, goes through a predictable series of emotional reactions. Firstly there is protest, active searching and crying, secondly there is despair, which is a passive state, characterised by sadness, and finally, there is detachment, a disregard and avoidance of the mother, when she returns.

There are three kinds of attachment styles, based on the early attachment process: secure; anxious; or avoidant. Secure attachment is when the infant sees the mother as responsive and available to meet their needs, even if she is out of sight. An anxious style characterises a fearful attachment to the mother, with separation anxiety evident. There is a lack of confidence in the mothers' accessibility and her response, and chronic anxiety may develop. Avoidant attachment can result from major separation experiences and serves a defensive function (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

This theory has been extended to suggest that adult romantic relationship styles are reflections of the attachment adults had with their parents. Adults in the secure group find it easy to get close to others and are comfortable with dependency. They have few fears about being abandoned. Those in the avoidant group find it difficult to get close to others, have extreme difficulty with trust, and have problems in allowing themselves to depend on others. They have issues with intimacy, and experience anxiety when others seek to be close to them. In the anxious / ambivalent group there is insecurity about many issues. These individuals seek extreme closeness with others, worry that they may not be liked or loved, fear abandonment, and seek total fusion with their partner (Bee, 2000).

Both parents are important in determining long-term attachment styles. It has been found that parents of the avoidant group are more demanding, disrespectful, cold, rejecting and critical, with fathers being especially forceful, uncaring and lacking in affection. This description bears striking resemblance to the domestically violent father (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Witnessing parental violence is part of a set of traumatogenic influences on early development and attachment formation. That this occurs over prolonged and vulnerable developmental phases becomes a powerful source of trauma, placing the child at risk for various problems. Observing violence triggers emotional and physiological reactions. The child would have an acute need to reduce the impact of the trauma, but may feel unable to turn to their parent/s for comfort due to insecure attachment. Insecure attachment also increases negative parent-child interactions, and decreases parental involvement and emotional availability (Dutton, 2000).

Cummings and Davies (1994) try to understand children's reactions to adult conflict using an emotional insecurity hypothesis. Although children's reactions to violence are varied, they can be understood as attempts to establish or re-establish a sense of emotional security, based on their attachment to their primary caregivers. Their reactions range from withdrawal to assurance seeking. But parenting in violent families often results in the needs of the children not being consistently met. Abused mothers are experienced by their children as ineffective and unavailable mothers. The belief that the parent is able to provide security and protection is shattered when that parent uses violence or is themselves violently abused.

### 3.4 OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY

The relationship between the self and objects is an important organising principle in people's lives. Object relations are described as intrapsychic structures that are affected by early relationships, which have an effect on later interpersonal relationships. Object relations are the mental representations of self and others, the others being the objects to which the child relates. During the stage of attachment there is confusion in the child's mind as to what is the self and what is the object, as they are not seen as independent of each other. This stage is followed by a period of differentiation whereby the child makes attempts at separation from the object of their attachment. This allows for the mental differentiation of the child from their parents. Normally this stage will shift into the integration stage. In this stage the self and the object representations will be in a relationship with each other. In other words they will be separate but related. The child can now learn to relate without fear of losing their autonomy (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999).

Most object relations theorists see normal development as proceeding through the process of "good enough" mothering. This leads to the integration of positive and negative representations of self and other (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999).

The stage of introjection is the incorporation of the object representations into the individual's psyche. During symbiosis the mother and child are perceived as one, but as the child matures the process of identification takes place, whereby objects have influence but become separate. Facilitating this phase is the mirroring and idealisation of the child by their parents (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999).

The process of integration is thought to be essential for the development of a resilient and reality-based self-concept, as well as internal regulatory processes that are stable in the face of adversity. According to Prochaska and Norcross (1999) during the integration stage the child learns to integrate the good and bad self-images into one experience of the self. At the same time the child needs to integrate the good and the bad object representations into a single experienced object. Experiences that come from within the self that were not integrated into the early self-image, for example the angry self, continue to be split off from the self. If these experiences come up again later in life, they can cause a state of disintegration within the individual.

Splitting occurs if the child splits off self-images perceived as bad. Children also split off bad object-images, such as the angry mother or father, to reduce their sense of threat. This is done in order for there to be less to fear from their parents. If a child needs to maintain the split representation of their caregiver, so that their benevolent features can be retained, they may be left with a split representation of the self (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

A child is unlikely to be able to integrate the good and bad representations of self and caregiver under conditions of adverse parenting, for example, where the balance between nurturing and limit setting may not have been achieved. This may lead to a need to split good from bad representations, in order to protect the positive object from the presumed destructive power of the bad object. For example, a child with a parent who is violent may need to keep separate the abusive part of their parent representation, such as their destructive anger, from the more nurturing and safe aspects of the object, in order to protect those features (Prochaska & Norcross, 1999).

### **3.5 FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY**

Family systems theory views the family as a whole, rather than looking at the individual members in isolation. This theory attempts to understand the effects of family violence on the entire system, rather than just on the individual. The systems approach looks at how parental violence may be serving a function for the family, and tries to understand the child's role in this family system (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Family functioning, family communication, transactional patterns of conflict, separateness, connectedness, cohesiveness and adaptation to change are understood as intrafamilial processes, and define the family as a system. Recurring patterns of interaction between the members of the family reveal the family's transactional patterns. All members of the family, including the children, are involved in ongoing reciprocal relationships with the family system, both influencing and being influenced by it (Whitchurch & Constantine, in Dangor, 1999).

Violence tends to occur in families characterised by particular relationship structures. In violent families boundaries may be too rigid or too flexible, relationships too enmeshed or too disengaged. These families may be characterised by a type of underorganisation, in which their relationships and functional structures

are inconsistent, undifferentiated or lacking in flexibility. Interrupted parenting, atypical boundaries, alignments, and power structures are the family environment within which these children grow and develop (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

In dysfunctional families, such as those characterised by violence, there is often weak executive functioning, whereby the person who is designated to carry out certain tasks is left without the power to do so. Children are left without the power to carry out essential developmental tasks, which inhibits their potential and has a detrimental effect on their development. Alternatively, they may execute these tasks in an atypical way, shaped by their family's problematic structure and functioning (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Families characterised by violence are often socially, economically and educationally deprived. They have limited and inconsistent repertoires to carry out the necessary family tasks and functions and have difficulty in solving their problems. Their limited coping styles leave them at a distinct disadvantage, which can be exacerbated by adverse social circumstances and numerous family and personal stressors. This interferes with the learning of new and more adaptive approaches and organisational structures within the family (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Interparental violence is seen within an interactional context of repetitive sequences of behaviour. Violence is viewed within a context of circular causality, and its functional role within the family system needs to be discerned. The family systems perspective tries to understand the role that violence plays in the family's functioning and the role the family plays in its continuation. Despite acknowledging these systemic characteristics, this approach does not condone violence in any way (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

The systemic perspective has come under criticism from feminists. Attributing wife abuse to dysfunctional patterns of interaction could be seen as blaming battered women for their own victimisation. The systemic model's circular and causal explanations conceal the existence of power within the family system. The question remains of how, within a patterned, holistic, interactional and circular system, an abusive and powerful individual is to be made accountable (Dangor, 1999).

According to Bograd (1984) the systemic formulations for domestic violence deflect the focus away from the social conditions that give rise to family violence. Holding both partners equally accountable for the battering is erroneous and it hides the gendered nature of wife abuse.

### 3.6 THE FAMILY DISRUPTION HYPOTHESIS

The Family Disruption Hypothesis is a model developed by Jaffe, Wolfe and Wilson (1990). It attempts to explain the connection between significant negative family events, such as wife abuse, and developmental problems in children. The theory postulates that because a child's sense of self originates in their early experiences with their family, violence between parents would disrupt their social and emotional functioning, leading to psychological and social maladjustment.

The family disruption hypothesis accounts for the adjustment problems of children exposed to violence, based on the child's attempts to cope with a situation that is frightening and unpredictable, and which brings extensive changes into their lives. The child not only has to face the direct turmoil created by the violent events, but has to deal with the disruptions and stressors that result. In other words, they must find a way to cope with the immediate threats and dangers of the violence, as well as dealing with the multiple forms of "fallout". This can include changes in parenting effectiveness and high levels of distress among family members (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

This theory sees the detrimental effects of domestic violence affecting children in two ways. Firstly, the child is affected directly by being exposed to deviant emotional and behavioural expression by their parents. Children are particularly affected by interparental anger, which causes them distress and threatens their sense of security. They may develop an exaggerated sense of responsibility for the violence, and feel that it is their duty to prevent it from occurring. They may try to do this by defusing their father's anger and protecting their mothers. They also have a strong tendency to blame themselves for what takes place in their homes (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

Other direct effects of the violence are increases in the aggressive behaviour of the child, through modelling their father's violent behaviour. There may also be direct issues regarding the child's safety, as they may themselves be in danger from the violence (Humphreys, 1993; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

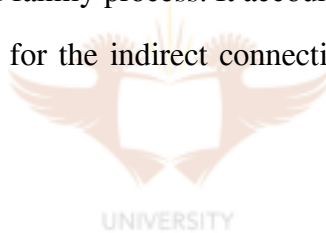
Secondly, this model looks at the indirect effects of disrupted parenting and ineffective, inconsistent child and family management. It examines the interrelationships between wife abuse, maternal stress and coping, and the stress and coping responses of the children. These three factors interact and put stress on each other (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).



The direct and negative impact of wife abuse impacts the mother's ability to parent, and compromises her child management skills. This puts strain on the mother-child relationship, which in turn escalates the child's attempt to cope with overwhelming negative events in the family. Reduced ability to parent are combined with increasingly urgent needs from the child for more attention and nurturing. That these needs are not sufficiently met further disturbs the child. This demonstrates some of the damaging effects of "fallout" from wife abuse (Humphreys, 1993; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

The reciprocal nature of these interactions needs to be emphasised. Due to decreased effectiveness in parenting the child is inclined to behave in an increasingly problematic way. The child's behavioural and emotional reactions then play a reciprocal role in maintaining the problems in the family, by placing stress on the mother's parenting abilities, as well as on the marital relationship. This may further exacerbate family tension and increase the likelihood of more aggression taking place (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

This model is part of a systemic theory of family process. It accounts not only for the direct linkages between wife abuse and child problems, but also for the indirect connections between domestic violence and child maladjustment (Humphreys, 1993).



### **3.7 THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF VIOLENCE**

Social learning theory is one of the most popular perspectives used to explain the consequences of domestic violence on children. The family is seen as the training ground for the learning of violence. Violent behaviour is modelled in adulthood as the individual uses their childhood experiences when developing intimate relationship roles (Padayachee, 1988, in Dangor, 1999).

Learning theory is based on the understanding that behaviour is learned through observing others and modelling how they behave. According to Bandura (in Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997) observing how parents behave in their own intimate relationship provides one of the first learning opportunities of behavioural alternatives for conflict resolution. Based on this premise it is believed that those who observe violent behaviour may also imitate it. If it is reinforced, resulting in desired consequences, there is a high probability that it will be repeated (Brewster, 2002; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997).

Children acquire many behaviours, such as aggression, cooperation, delay of gratification and sharing, through observational learning, in other words, by watching others perform them. Bandura's studies on

children's imitation of aggressive behaviours through observation of a model demonstrate this (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997).

Many factors need to be in place for behaviour to be acquired. Performance of behaviours, for example aggression, depended on certain environmental payoffs. In addition numerous variables, such as model attributes, influence the imitative process. Observation can also lead to generalised inhibition or disinhibition of behaviour. The model's behaviour may not be directly imitated, but will result in a class of behaviours that are likely to occur. The acquisition of a behavioural repertoire involves cognitive process, such as attention, memory and problem solving, as well as the anticipation of desired consequences. This is more than simple mimicking (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997).

The intergenerational transmission of violence theory is based on social learning theory. Violence is learned through family role models, directly or indirectly, and reinforced during childhood. If the child sees aggression and anger as a way of coping with stress, or as an "appropriate" conflict resolution strategy, they are at great risk for displaying the same behaviours. This is particularly true if there is approval for the use of violence (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

Child witnesses of interparental aggression experience aggressive modelling and may learn to imitate the aggressive strategies they are regularly exposed to. In addition they may make use of disruptive tactics to put a stop to parental conflict. Their cognitions about utilising aggressive behaviour in problem solving may develop in line with the aggression they witness. They may then apply these aggressive tactics in their own relationships (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Pepler, Catallo & Moore, 2000).

Mihalic and Elliott (1997) found support in their study for a social learning model of violence. They also discovered that the impact of exposure to violence during childhood differed for males and females, with the social learning of violence during childhood and adolescence having a stronger effect on females than males (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997).

Early exposure to family violence may be interpreted differently by males and females, and therefore does not have the same impact on them. Females, having more nurturing personalities, may experience more intense emotional reactions to parental violence, leading to more significant and substantial consequences. Parental violence may also be more visible for girls as they spend more time at home, especially when younger. Witnessing violence for females also appears to impact other domains of life, such as adolescent violence and victimisation. In adulthood these women also experience greater stress and less marital

satisfaction. The authors suggest that males and females need to be examined separately when looking at a social learning model of violence (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997).

There is considerable support for social learning theory and it is seen as an important perspective. But this theory has been criticised for not adequately explaining the wide range of internalising and externalising behaviours exposed children show. While this theory may predict aggressive behaviour, it fails to explain the underlying processes in the development of adjustment problems. Attention needs to be given to the mediating factors and intervening variables between childhood violence and adult violence, as these may determine whether or not individuals use or are abused by violence (Kolbo, Blakely & Engelman, 1996; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

Exposure to violence does not automatically produce the same consequences for every individual, therefore mere exposure to violence does not inevitably lead to intergenerational transmission. While the home environment places children at risk, mediating factors within the family and the child interact and affect outcomes (Moore, Pepler, Mae & Kates, 1989).

Exposure, according to Bandura (in Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997) does not guarantee observational learning. Four component processes influence the type and degree of observational learning that takes place. These are, attentional processes, retention processes, motor production processes, and incentive and motivational processes. There may be breakdowns in any or all of these processes, resulting in observational learning failing to manifest in behaviour.

Markowitz (2001) proposes an attitudinal explanation of the transmission of violence between generations. This suggests that exposure to violence leads to the approval of its use, and it is legitimised as a means to solve conflict. Children exposed to violence use aggressive behaviour due to acquiring attitudes that facilitate the use of violence. Other factors can contribute to the relationship between exposure and engaging in violence as an adult, for example, personality differences, genetics, and parents and children's exposure to similarly adverse social contexts.

There is support for the cycle of violence theory, as it is found that relatively more adult perpetrators or victims of violence come from violent families than non-perpetrators. Nevertheless, the percentage differences between the two groups are usually very small. In addition, the percentage of adult perpetrators or victims of domestic violence who have come from violent childhoods tends to vary considerably between studies. The percentage is often less than half, and many perpetrators and victims of violence are not found to have come from violent families (Mullender & Morley, 1994).

When reviewing the literature, Kaufman and Zigler (1987) found that the best estimate of the intergenerational transmission of violence was about 30%. While about one third of those who have been exposed to violence during childhood will perpetuate the cycle, two-thirds will not.

The disadvantage of social learning theory is that it does not account for those individuals who witnessed violence during childhood but do not display violence in their current relationships. Having the experience of violence in childhood may increase the chances of becoming violent in adulthood, but it is not a certain or direct process. While there may be cases where experiencing abuse in one's family of origin may lead to the continuation of this pattern in future generations, what is questioned is the notion that learnt behaviour is repeated in a simplistic form. This does not take into account any choice or decision making process (Mullender & Morley, 1994).

Bevan and Higgins (2002) state that the perpetration of domestic violence involves more complex processes and interactions than modelling and reinforcement. They do not suggest that learning theory's explanation of the transmission of violence is false, but rather that it is an inadequate understanding of the phenomenon, as does not give account of the influence of contributing factors.

Jaffe, Wolfe and Wilson (1990) highlight that this theory is incomplete because it fails to identify confirmed mechanisms to account for the ways in which intergenerational transmission takes place. While this hypothesis relies on the direct influence of the violent role model on children's behaviour, it does not explain the more indirect mechanisms that may influence children's adjustment. It fails to address how violence in the family, apart from modelling to the child aggressive strategies for conflict resolution, might set in motion events that would disrupt the child's development and progress.

### **3.8 THE ECOLOGICAL MODEL**

An ecological approach examines individual and environmental factors to explain development, stressing the importance of the context within which this occurs. It emphasises the multifaceted nature of development, noting the cognitive, physiological, emotional and social capacities of children, and the developmental tasks they have to perform in these domains. Looking at the interaction amongst personal, situational, social, cultural and political factors results in a complex, but more genuine view of this problem, and it is this

complexity that is so valuable in understanding the effects of witnessing domestic violence on children (Brewster, 2002; Fantuzzo, McDermott & Lutz, 1999; Mohr & Fantuzzo, 2000).

A developmental ecological perspective enables a more comprehensive and accurate assessment of the effects that observing domestic violence has on child development. It does this by addressing the effects of variables unique to the child, in addition to how different aspects of the environment affect the successful resolution of the child's critical developmental tasks (Bevan & Higgins, 2002).

According to developmental psychologist Cicchetti (1989) children need to successfully resolve each stage's challenges in order for growth and adaptation to take place. Ontogenetic and contextual variables interact and affect the development of the child, and their mastery of stage competencies. Should upheaval occur in the environment this model would predict that essential developmental tasks would be interrupted. The specific effects of the disruption would depend on the child's developmental stage and the actual task they are involved in.

This perspective requires an understanding of how multiple contextual influences and multiple areas of functioning combine to shape the course of development. Interaction with different spheres of influence, such as family, peers, school and community can alter the course of development by creating different pathways for children who are attempting to adapt within their environments. Contexts can therefore promote or impede development in many different ways and influence the outcomes that will be experienced. It is impossible to try to understand a child's behaviour apart from its context, as their behaviour is an indication of their ability to adapt to the demands and expectations of their contexts. With exposure to violence taking place within the family context, successful completion of developmental tasks becomes problematic for these children, and negative developmental outcomes become more likely (Fantuzzo, McDermott & Lutz, 1999).

The ecological model also accounts for positive and resilient outcomes. It acknowledges the presence of protective factors within the contextual spheres of influence, and how these can help the child to successfully resolve developmental issues, even positively adapting within their violent families (Fantuzzo, McDermott & Lutz, 1999).

### **3.9 FEMINIST THEORY**

Abuse cannot be separated from the social context within which it occurs. This social context is one in which patriarchal values and power structures dominate, and in which male aggression is not only tolerated, but frequently encouraged as a legitimate means of expression of power. Domestic violence reflects societal norms that use violence to teach, discipline and control. It encourages men to be powerful, and women to be compliant and pleasing. The wider social system must be taken into account when seeking to understand the phenomena of violence against women (Hamilton, 1998).

Most theories look at the issue of wife abuse through a patriarchal lens. This minimises the role that power and control play. The central assumption of feminist theory is that power is unequally distributed within a relationship, with the male partner being the one holding this power. Violence is used to perpetuate his power and to maintain control over the female partner (Dangor, 1999).

A contextual approach to wife battering is required which takes into account the power differentials described above. Domestic violence, from a feminist perspective, is not seen as the result of a dysfunctional system. These patterns of wife abuse can only be understood when seen within their social context. It is within this context that men use violence to subordinate and oppress women. Violence is therefore seen as an overt form of social control. Violence is an approved form of behaviour in many parts of the culture, and is maintained by cultural beliefs and stereotypes about the role of women in society (Bograd, 1984).

Dutton (in Dangor, 1999) provides a critique of feminist theory which questions the belief that patriarchy elicits violence against women directly. Instead, as Dutton states, patriarchy provides the values and attitudes that certain men can use to justify the abuse of women. This would explain why the majority of men do not use violence. He believes that there needs to be a specific focus on the psychopathological aspects that interact with patriarchal culture, which lead to violence against women.

That feminist theory uses patriarchy alone to explain wife abuse is one of the major criticisms levelled against it. Single-factor explanations such as this are cannot solely account for complex social phenomenon such as wife abuse (Mashishi, 1998).

### **3.10 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Theories are important in order to increase understanding of phenomena, explain outcomes and to predict events. As advances in this field are made it becomes clear that no single conceptual model can adequately explain the complexity of the problem of witnessing marital violence and the variety of outcomes that result.

The intention of this chapter was to introduce the reader to some of the most widely used theories that have attempted to explain the problem under discussion.

Understanding the multiple consequences of witnessing domestic violence requires more comprehensive theories to be developed. Multifactor theories, taking into account the relationships between the individual, family, culture and society are found to be most useful (Mohr & Fantuzzo, 2000; Rabenstein & Lehmann, 2000).

The Posttraumatic Stress Model was the first theory to be reviewed. This model discussed how children are traumatised by witnessing the violence of their fathers towards their mothers. A developmental perspective was given to understand trauma symptomatology in children. Attachment Theory explained the effects of witnessing domestic violence as being a result of disruptions in the attachment process. The chapter progressed to a discussion of Object Relations Theory and the development of early intrapsychic structures that have an impact on later interpersonal relationships. Family Systems Theory was mentioned in order to explain the reciprocal interactional patterns that take place within the violent family. This was followed by the Family Disruption Hypothesis that explains direct and indirect effects of witnessing domestic violence. The contribution of the Intergenerational Transmission of Violence Theory, one of the most popular understandings of the long-term effects of witnessing domestic violence, was examined. Finally Feminist Theory was used to understand the effects of witnessing violence in terms of the broader structure of society, focusing on the oppression of women. No research which specifically examined theories of exposure to interparental violence within South Africa were found.

The relational approaches, such as the family disruption hypothesis, object relations theory, the emotional security hypothesis and attachment theory differ from systems theory in that they focus more on the dyadic parent-child relationship within the family than on relationships in the family as a whole. These approaches all provide underlying support for the formation of attachment and emotional security between children and caregivers (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

The above-mentioned theoretical approaches are well suited to highlighting child witnesses' social and relationship difficulties, including their aggressive problem solving tendencies. Parents in violent homes are less likely to be able to focus on their children's needs in any consistent way. Children have learnt that social interactions are unsafe and that they need to be cautious. In addition ongoing parental violence could lead to disruptions in the caretaker attachment bond. This could impact on the success of other areas of parenting and socialisation. There is evidence that the attachment bond between these children and their mothers is less

secure. Their caretakers appear less capable of successfully guiding their children through the completion of developmental tasks (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

## **CHAPTER 4 THE EFFECTS ON CHILDREN EXPOSED TO MARITAL VIOLENCE**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

Domestic violence remains a largely hidden phenomenon, shrouded in many myths and misconceptions. Even less is known about the impact of woman abuse on the abused woman's children. Yet there is significant evidence that violence in the family is extremely relevant to children's well being, in their present and in their futures. The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the effects of witnessing domestic violence on the children of abused women.

Initial research focused on clinical impressions of the difficulties experienced by children of battered women. Recent research has attempted to gain more precise and thorough explanations and understandings of how the children adjust and what the impact is on their developmental progress. There has also been a focus on the processes and mechanisms involved in the impact of witnessing domestic violence. This recent research has confirmed the serious consequences for children witnessing violence. Nevertheless few studies provide a coherent and comprehensive understanding of these consequences (Fantuzzo, De Paola, Lambert, Martino, Anderson & Sutton, 1991; Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Results suggest that living with domestic violence can be an extremely disorganising experience for children, significantly affecting emotional, behavioural and cognitive functioning. The main conclusion to emerge is that children who have witnessed domestic violence are likely to display increased levels of internalising and



externalising behaviour problems, and lowered social competence (Carlson, 1996; Davis & Carlson, 1987; Jouriles, Murphy, & O'Leary, 1994).

The review by Fantuzzo and Lindquist (1989) examined the behavioural, emotional, social, intellectual and physical problems experienced by these children. All of the studies covered in their review found evidence of aggression and other externalised behaviours. Most studies found evidence of negative emotional impact. Social, intellectual and physical functioning were also found to be problematic (Mullender & Morley, 1994).

These problems can be seen to reflect the stresses that these children experience, for example, the shame and embarrassment associated with belonging to a family where the demeaning experience of violence between parents takes place (Pepler, Catallo & Moore, 2000; Sudermann & Jaffe, 1999).

A consistent finding, across studies, is that children who are exposed to interparental violence display a variety of behavioural and emotional adjustment difficulties, when compared to children who have not been exposed to domestic violence (Edelson, 1999).

Children who have witnessed domestic violence undergo many negative changes, which can be ascribed to the impact of exposure. There are several symptoms evident in children who have been exposed to violence, and they suffer significant and often severe setbacks in terms of their emotional, cognitive and behavioural development (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).

The symptomatology and adjustment problems of exposed children will be discussed in the following sections on internalising behaviour problems, externalising behaviour problems, social competency problems, as well as cognitive and academic performance problems. The consequences for exposed children can be of a serious nature and their difficulties severe. In many cases clinical treatment may be required. It needs to be stressed that these effects are not consistent across all children, and child and family factors play a significant role in the differences in functioning and adjustment that are evident. The factors that play a role in the heterogeneity of impact will be discussed in the following chapter (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

#### **4.3 INTERNALISING BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS**

The term 'internalising disorders' is used as a broad term for anxiety related disorders. More specific terms such as phobias, obsessions, compulsions, anxiety disorders and depression are used to describe what may be seen in an internalising syndrome (Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 2000).

Elevated levels of internalising behaviour problems are evident across studies on witnessing. The symptoms of emotional distress are the less visible indications of developmental disturbances. The symptoms associated are: depression, high levels of anxiety, withdrawal, and even suicidal behaviour (Carlson, 1996; Davis & Carlson, 1987; Fantuzzo, et al., 1991).

Problems such as overcompliance, sadness, excessive worrying, fear of separation, phobias, tics, enuresis, insomnia and emotional detachment are also experienced. Anxiety may be specifically manifested in behaviours such as nail-biting and hair-pulling (Fantuzzo & Lindquist, 1989; Sternberg, Lamb, Greenbaum, Cicchetti, Dawud, Cortes, Krispin & Lorey, 1993).

#### **4.3 EXTERNALISING BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS**

Externalising behaviour problems manifest in different ways to the internalising disorders described above. Whereas children who suffer from internalising disorders appear sad, withdrawn, timid and fearful, the externalising disorders are far more disruptive in their manifestation. Externalising disorders cause more disturbances, with noncompliance and aggression being evident (Wicks-Nelson & Israel, 2000).

Children who witness spousal violence display more behaviour problems in settings such as home, school and the community (Fantuzzo & Lindquist, 1989). Externalising behaviour problems displayed by these children are elevated levels of aggression, acting out behaviours and uncooperativeness. Other examples are behaviours such as temper tantrums, impulsivity, hyperactivity, conflict with siblings and peers, stealing, truancy, bullying and cruelty to animals (Fantuzzo, et al., 1991; Pepler, Catallo & Moore, 2000; Segal & Labe, 1990).

Social competence problems, discussed below, are the types of problems children acquire with regard to their peer relationships. Children from violent families, who have experienced considerable violence between their parents, are compromised in terms of their social abilities and their willingness to form social relationships, despite their need for support.

#### **4.4 SOCIAL COMPETENCY PROBLEMS**

Impaired social competence appears in children who have been exposed to domestic violence. Social adjustment problems are found with regard to several areas, such as, their number of social activities, their social achievement, participation in social activities and their interpersonal interactions with peers. Children who have been exposed to family violence have been found to have fewer social activities and lowered social competence. They also show a higher rate of conflictual social interactions than comparison groups of nonwitnesses (Fantuzzo, et al., 1991; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

Exposure to violence between parents may inhibit and impair the development of a range of social skills. In families where verbal and physical violence has been modelled as an appropriate response to interpersonal problems, children may experience several deficits in their social abilities. For example, they may interpret situations as hostile when they are not, and they may not be aware of nonviolent alternatives to social problem solving (Moore, et al., 1989).

These children's opportunities for developing successful relationships may be limited for several reasons. They may use their school context to act out their feelings of anger and hurt. They may become disruptive in class or alternatively become quiet and withdrawn. Due to their family circumstances they are prevented from developing positive peer relationships, resulting in their becoming increasingly isolated from their social world (Pepler, Catallo & Moore, 2000).

#### **4.5 COGNITIVE FUNCTIONING AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

Given the pervasive effects of exposure to domestic violence, school performance is likely to be affected. The child's functioning at school compromises their academic performance in several ways. They may experience difficulty paying attention and adhering to their tasks. As a result they may not be able to keep up. Poor attendance may be a factor, as they may fear for their mother's safety when they are not at home, and therefore be more inclined to miss school. They may also experience more illness due to the internalising problems associated with witnessing the violence (Carlson, 1996; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Pepler, Catallo & Moore, 2000).

The family environment itself may undermine children's opportunities to have stimulating experiences and positive parental interactions. In neglectful families parents spend less time in close proximity to their

children. They engage less, are less responsive, more insensitive and less involved in their activities. The abuse interferes with family processes in a way that could impact on children's intellectual development. The Huth-Bocks, Levendosky and Semel (2001) study indicates that domestic violence uniquely contributes to problems in the intellectual functioning of child witnesses. This takes place over and above other risk factors such as child abuse and low socioeconomic status.

Exposure to interparental violence is seen to have the greatest impact on preschool children's verbal abilities. This may be explained because verbal skills and language development are more affected by the environment than are visual-spatial skills. Maternal depression was found to be an important mediating factor in the effects of domestic violence on children's well being. Depressed mothers are less verbally interactive and responsive to their children, as well as more withdrawn. This contributes to the home environment being less stimulating (Huth-Bocks, Levendosky & Semel, 2001).

Living in a home where violence occurs may affect a child's development to the extent that learning difficulties arise. In these cases preventing wife abuse would contribute to preventing this type of disability from arising (Mullender & Morley, 1994).

#### **4.7 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Looking at the effects of domestic violence exposure on children it is evident that the areas affected are very comprehensive, touching on most aspects of the child's life. As discussed in this chapter child witnesses show greater internalising and externalising disorders, lower social competence, poorer school performance, lower self-esteem, and display more aggression. Most aspects of the child's development are therefore affected, which may lead to distorted developmental trajectories in their lives (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Children's behavioural profiles and their responses to domestic violence are vastly different. This is true even for children who come from the same family. Part of the shift in focus of research in this area has been to look at the characteristics of individual children, their families, and their social support networks, to identify what may modify the more global effects of exposure (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

The following chapter will examine individual differences between children on several levels. The chapter will look at the complex issue of what constitutes potential protective or vulnerability factors, which serve to increase or decrease the risks contained within exposure to violence in the family (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

## **CHAPTER 5. FACTORS MEDIATING AND MODERATING THE EFFECTS OF MARITAL VIOLENCE ON CHILDREN**

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

During the two decades many contributions to understanding the short and long-term impact on children who witness domestic violence have been made. Growth and development in the field has led to an increase in the number and complexity of research questions. These questions are no longer simple ones with regard to whether or not children are affected by the violence they witness, but rather in what ways the different genders are affected, at different stages of development, and in different domains of functioning. Interest also lies in discovering the significant risk and protective factors involved, and in what ways they might modify the immediate, short- and long-term consequences of the experience of witnessing violence (Jaffe, Sudermann & Geffner, 2000; Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002).

For most children exposure to domestic violence has a negative impact, but these effects are not consistent across all children. Children show a variety of outcomes to witnessing domestic violence, even children coming from the same family. Several factors play a significant role in the variations seen (Mullender, Hague, Imam, Kelly, Malos & Regan, 2002; Salzinger, Feldman, Ng-Mak, Mojica, Stockhammer & Rosario, 2002).

There are a wide range of individual differences in the way children are affected by exposure, and the many mediating, moderating and protective factors differentiate each child's response. The picture created is a complex one where these many variables interact with each other in a recursive manner within the child's system. In addition, this often takes place within different contexts. In order to accommodate this complexity

recent research has moved away from simple cause-effect relationships, and is now attempting to investigate and shed light on these intricate processes (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

While the negative effects of witnessing interparental violence have been documented, little attention has been paid to the specific mechanisms underlying the relationship between witnessing marital violence and the negative effects on children. It is important to begin to explore the processes underlying children's responses to witnessing maternal abuse. Process-orientated models can help to understand the mechanisms that would mediate and account for the different effects of interparental violence on children's adjustment (Kerig, 1998; O'Keefe, 1994).

Moderating factors are conditions that existed prior to exposure. These variables are pre-existing characteristics or circumstances that influence the direction of the relationship between exposure to violence and outcome. Moderating variables can be understood as independent variables that can have an impact on the effect of a risk factor on the outcome (Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002; Levendovsky & Graham-Berman, 1998; Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Mediating factors are variables that intervene between the event of exposure and the outcome. A mediator variable has been described as a catalyst in a reaction. For example, an event may occur, but without the catalyst, i.e., the presence of the mediator, there will not be a reaction. There would therefore be no relationship between the event and the outcome (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

There are times where a variable can act as both a moderator and mediator. The example used by Rossman, Hughes and Rosenberg (1999) is that a positive relationship between a mother and child could prepare the child to face adversity prior to the event, but could also provide maternal support while the adverse event was happening.

Factors that moderate or accentuate the impact of witnessing domestic violence can be broken down into those that relate to the child themselves, and those that relate to the context within which their experience occurs, for example their family and their community. For the individual child, age, sex, developmental level, physical development, gender, race, and class are significant. Within their environment significant factors are, the extent of the violence, its frequency, whether or not they are direct victims of abuse, the psychological functioning of their parents, their relationships with their parents, their role in the family, the family context itself, other sources of social support, socioeconomic status, and family moves and separations (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

The variables that can influence children's adjustment will be divided into three categories, for the purpose of this discussion: those factors that relate to children, those that relate to the parents and the family, and those factors that are situational and contextual. The purpose of this chapter is to examine influencing factors in all three categories. However the question of how particular children might be affected depends on certain combinations of factors and how they interact, for example age and gender. In reality it is difficult to completely separate out all of the factors and the way they relate and interact (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

## **5.2 DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS AFFECTING INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN**

In order to provide a greater understanding of the children who were reared in the atypical environment of a violent family, this section will examine child related developmental factors. It will assess the various developmental domains, the many different patterns of problems and difficulties seen, as well as the resilience displayed (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Children display very different behavioural profiles in response to witnessing violence. Part of the recent emphasis in research is to examine mechanisms and characteristics of individual children, their families and the support networks that may modify the effects of exposure. These individual factors constitute potential vulnerability and protective factors, that may increase or decrease the risk of exposure. These protective and vulnerability factors are also likely to combine in various ways to produce particular responses. There are several models being developed to explain their different ways of combining.

An accumulation model of risk views the various factors as additive. Two vulnerability factors are considered a greater risk than one. Other researchers assume that a certain number of factors can be absorbed by the child, without considerable negative effect, but beyond that number these factors begin interacting to produce even greater vulnerability. An emerging approach looks at the direction these factors operate in. Whether they operate in the direction of protection or vulnerability may depend on the context they are experienced in. It needs be emphasised that all the factors involved interact to create different and more extreme outcomes, than any single factor would alone (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

### **5.2.1 THE DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT**

It is a widely held belief that parents from violent marriages are unable to meet the developmental needs of their children due to the several reasons that will be discussed below (Elbow, 1982). The impact on children of exposure to abuse varies considerably as a function of their developmental level. Children exposed to

domestic violence are invariably at critical developmental periods, placing them at particular risk due to inadequate conditions in their environments (Carlson, 1996).

Children are impacted upon in ways, that can distort their developmental trajectories. Pepler, Catallo and Moore (2000) propose a developmental model of risk in order to understand the different behavioural profiles of children exposed to domestic violence. Children's adjustment problems can be understood by looking at the interaction of risk and protective factors in relation to development. The factors involved are found within the individual and their environments.

### **5.2.2 AGE SPAN DIFFERENCES**

When assessing behaviour in children developmental norms provide a useful means of comparison, with age being one index of developmental level. Typical rates and sequences in the growth of skills, knowledge and social-emotional behaviour serve as developmental standards in evaluating whether or not there are problems, as well as their nature.

Age differences in the impact of exposure have been found in various studies, but the results are not consistent. It has been suggested that there may be a bimodal distribution of negative outcomes, with school age children being less affected than very young children and adolescents respectively (Carlson, 1996).

Younger children are more likely to be witnesses of spousal violence, as children up to five years of age are disproportionately represented in violent households and are therefore at greater risk of exposure. Several researchers have found that younger children are more vulnerable to the impact of exposure to family violence. This may be due to their dependence on the family and their developmental immaturity. They have fewer internal capacities to regulate their emotions and thoughts and fewer extrafamilial resources available to help them to cope. The older child though would have been exposed to more ongoing violence, due to its chronicity, which could also result in serious effects (Berman, 1993; Fantuzzo, Boruch, Beriama, Atkins & Marcus, 1997; Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

While the Holden and Ritchie (1991) study found that younger children had fewer problems than older children, Rossman, Hughes and Rosenberg (1999) note that this could be due to the fact that the problems of younger children are less noticeable to adult observers.

#### **5.2.2.1 Violence During Pregnancy**



Violence during pregnancy is a common theme for abused women. Many abused women report that assaults either began or escalated during their first pregnancy. Being pregnant increases a woman's vulnerability rather than offering her protection from violence. It has been found that nearly 50% of abusive husbands are violent towards their wives during her pregnancy (Hilton, 1992; McGee, 2000; Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

If violence occurs there is enormous threat to the unborn child as assaults are often directed at the woman's abdomen. It has been suggested that the abuser may be making an unconscious attempt to get rid of the unborn foetus as it is now attracting his wife's attention. The time of pregnancy is therefore experienced by the abuser as potential loss, in the form of loss of his wife and loss of their marital relationship. The perpetrator may also feel out of control of the situation, which could exacerbate the risk of violence (Jasinski, 2001; Segal & Labe, 1990).

Consequences for the unborn child, should violence occur, are great. This includes stress and injury to the fetus, low birth weight, pre-term delivery, birth defects, miscarriage or even death (Jasinski, 2001; Mullender & Morley, 1994; Sudermann & Jaffe, 1999).



#### **5.2.2.2 Infants Exposed to Marital Violence**

Infants being raised in violent families may suffer from serious consequences. Some fathers hit, push and try to crush women while they are holding their babies. As infants spend so much time in their mother's arms and in her vicinity they are often literally in the middle of violent incidents. They have a great risk of being injured directly themselves (Hilton, 1992).

Infants exposed to violence exhibit several behavioural symptoms linked to this exposure. They display prolonged crying, irritability, difficulty sleeping, feeding problems and are not easily comforted. The result can be a failure to thrive. They may not gain weight or may even begin losing weight, which is detrimental to their own survival (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

Apart from their routines around feeding and sleeping being disrupted, their basic attachment needs may not be met. Playing and exploring, which are a crucial part of development, are interrupted (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990; Stephens, 1999; Sudermann & Jaffe, 1999).

#### **5.2.2.3 Preschool Children Exposed to Marital Violence**

The children that are most dependent on their primary caregivers are those most vulnerable to being exposed to the violence between them. Preschool children fall into this category, and have been found to display an increase in detrimental effects (Fantuzzo, Mohr & Noone, 2000).

Younger children may be more affected by the violence between their parents. Due to their level of development and undeveloped cognitive abilities they are less able to understand what is taking place and less able to access the necessary resources to cope. They may therefore be more likely to act out as a way of coping, which would lead to higher incidences of externalising behaviour problems (Hughes, 1982; Huth-Bocks, Levendosky & Semel, 2001; O'Keefe, 1994).

Because young children are at home most of the time they are more vulnerable to what is taking place in the home environment, and are more likely to experience declines in the quality of care they receive. When violence occurs other activities cease, and the basic needs of the child may not be met. The background climate of aggression may increase emotional arousal levels, and create distress. The child could concentrate on the violence, and thereby ignore other, more meaningful, stimuli in his or her environment (Berman, 1993).

Using a developmental framework is important in understanding why preschool children exposed to interparental violence display significant levels of behaviour problems and experience distress. Drawing on the work of Cicchetti (1989), Fantuzzo et al. (1991) have found that the stage salient issues that 3- to 6- year old children are negotiating appear to be impacted on by family violence. Among these issues are the emergence of empathy and prosocial behaviours. The development of these qualities is seriously disrupted in this age group through witnessing violence.

#### **5.2.2.4 School Age Children Exposed to Marital Violence**

School age children may experience severe emotional difficulties as a result of family violence. They experience shame and embarrassment, undermined self-esteem, feelings of isolation, as well as a threatened sense of security about their futures. They have reduced opportunities to develop their identities outside of their families, and few alternatives other than waiting for the violence to end (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

They might feel responsible for preventing the abuse, but have a divided sense of loyalty towards their parents. While wanting to protect their mother they have the conflicting need of wanting to respect and admire their father (Angless & Shefer, 1997).

At school children may seem distracted and inattentive. This may be due to a preoccupation with the violence that is taking place at home. The child may also be tired from being awake at night during parental fighting. These children are constantly hypervigilant, being alert for the first signs of violence. This would impact on their ability to concentrate and be attentive when in class (Berman, 1993; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

#### **5.2.2.5 Adolescent Exposure to Marital Violence**

Adolescents have generally been the subjects of fewer studies on the effects of exposure to domestic violence. One of the reasons being that they tend not to stay in shelters as often as younger children, and are therefore not as convenient a research sample (Carlson, 1990; 1991).

Due to the chronicity of domestic violence the effects on adolescents may be cumulative, as they have been exposed for longer periods of time than younger children. Another factor specific to adolescence pertains to the long-term effects of witnessing marital violence. The impact may be delayed, only becoming visible long after exposure began. Delayed reactions appear to be particularly common in girls, who may only show evidence of the impact during adolescence (Carlson, 1990; Christopoulos, Cohn, Shaw, Joyce, Sullivan-Hanson, Kraft, & Emery, 1987).

Witnessing violence in the home impacts significantly on the adolescent's relationship with their mothers. As seeing her being abused has been a common occurrence adolescents may normalise her suffering, even blame her for the family's problems. Alternatively they may be very protective towards her and go to great lengths to ensure her safety (Angless & Shefer, 1997).

Adolescent witnesses tend to show increases in aggression. They display acting out behaviours and may disrupt the family routine and manipulate the family system. Teenagers may become aggressive in their own relationships or develop a fear of being in an intimate relationship (Angless & Shefer, 1997; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

Several protective and vulnerability factors might mediate the link between witnessing violence in one's family of origin and using violence in dating relationships. For males self-esteem was found to be an

important protective factor. For females success in school had a protective effect. This is most likely due to the sense of self-efficacy and control that is acquired with positive school experiences. One variable, exposure to violence within the community, was found to be a common vulnerability factor for both males and females (O'Keef, 1998).

Gender is an important mediating factor as, according to social learning theory, males and females are socialised into sex-specific behaviours. Exposure to interparental violence therefore affects boys and girls differently. With regard to dating violence, gender differences suggest that the pattern of dating violence differs for males and females. In a study by O'Keef (1998) the predictors for male dating violence were much stronger than for females. This suggests that there may be other significant mediating factors in the intergenerational transmission of violence for females.

### **5.2.3 TEMPERAMENT**

A difficult temperament, characterised by irritability and high levels of arousal, is the disposition associated with some children exposed to violence. These children are generally more reactive and less able to calm themselves. They also appear to attend more to negative than positive events, show more negative emotions, especially sadness, have hostile interpersonal expectations, and recall more negative family interactions. The child's disposition also contributes to the way they are parented (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

Mothers of exposed children described their children as having more difficult temperaments than mothers of non-exposed children. In the Holden and Ritchie (1991) study, a greater percentage of children with difficult temperaments were found amongst children who had witnessed domestic violence, when contrasted with a comparison group whose mother's had not been abused.

Dispositional attitudes play an important mediating role in the effects of stressful situations such as witnessing domestic violence. Key ingredients in children's ability to cope with their experiences are: flexibility, a positive self-concept, a sense of self-efficacy, an internal locus of control, a cooperative, nonaggressive attitude, minimal impulsivity and a reflective cognitive style. These attributes give the child confidence that they have the ability to deal with the challenges and problems of life (Garmezy, in Humphreys, 1993; Moore, et al., 1989; Rutter, 1987).

A child with a fearful disposition who is arousal prone is at a greater disadvantage when witnessing violence. A fearful temperament could be a vulnerability factor as it predisposes exposed children to experience more

distress, and could lead to a greater number of posttraumatic stress symptoms (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

#### **5.2.4 EXPOSURE TO MULTIPLE FORMS OF CHILDHOOD ABUSE**

A shortcoming in the research on exposure to domestic violence is that many studies fail to distinguish between children who have been exposed to domestic violence, and children who have been direct victims of violence in their homes. The effects of witnessing violence alone, as opposed to witnessing violence as well as being physically abused, need to be separated out (Davis & Carlson, 1987; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

Some studies have found that physical abuse and being exposed to domestic violence contribute independently to problems in children, and appear to have additive effects (Carlson, 1996; Jouriles, Barling & O' Leary, 1987). Other studies have found that the effects on children who both witness marital violence, and who are abused themselves, are more severe (Hughes, Parkinson & Vargo, 1989).

Child physical abuse was introduced as a separate variable in a study by Hughes, Parkinson and Vargo (1989). Results show that children who were abused and who had witnessed violence were the most distressed. This was followed by those who witnessed violence but who had not been physically abused. Children who had neither witnessed violence nor been abused showed significantly less distress.

The Davis and Carlson (1987) study found that witnessing violence as well as being the victim of abuse determines the extent of the behaviour adjustment problems seen in children. The combination of both witnessing violence and being physically abused has more severe consequences for the child. Carlson (1991) confirms that the combined effects of physical abuse and witnessing marital violence are more severe. Adolescents exposed to both forms of abuse are left with a reduced sense of wellbeing compared to those who had not had both experiences. There appears to be a strong relationship between witnessing marital violence, experiencing child abuse, and child maladjustment (Carlson, 1996).

Henning, Leitenberg, Coffey, Turner and Bennett (1996) comment that exposure to violence between one's parents traumatises children in a way similar to other forms of childhood abuse, such as sexual abuse and physical maltreatment.

#### **5.2.5 GENDER AND EXPOSURE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Gender stereotypes guide judgements about what is expected for the norm. In most societies males are expected to be more aggressive, dominant, active and adventurous. Females are expected to be more passive, dependent, quiet, and sensitive. Gender is an important factor when studying exposure to interparental violence, as mechanisms of vulnerability vary subtly along gender lines, and interact with risk factors in ways that result in different patterns of maladjustment. Different developmental trajectories are found when comparing males and females exposed to interparental violence (Cummings, Pepler & Moore, 1999).

A question that has been at the fore of much of the research is which gender manifests the greatest maladjustment. Although many studies have found gender differences, the findings are inconsistent, making it difficult to draw definite conclusions regarding the effects of gender on outcome (Carlson, 1996; Cummings, Pepler & Moore, 1999; Mullender & Morley, 1994; Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Some research has concluded that boys are more symptomatic than girls exposed to the same stressors (Jouriles, Murphy & O' Leary, 1989). This is consistent with the child psychopathology literature where boys are regarded as being more vulnerable to a variety of psychosocial, physiological and neurodevelopmental risk factors (Rutter, 1989; Wicks-Nelson & Israel 2000). Other studies have questioned the assumption that boys are more vulnerable to the impact of exposure to domestic violence, concluding that girls are more negatively affected. Christopolous et al. (1987) for example, found more girls than boys scoring in the clinical range of psychological maladjustment. This study strongly suggests that some girls may experience more difficulties than their male counterparts (Cummings, Pepler & Moore, 1999).

O'Keefe (1994) found that boy's behaviour problems are predicted by the amount of violence witnessed, whereas for girls, the amount of mother-child aggression experienced, as well as the amount of violence witnessed predicted their externalising behaviour problems. Their results suggest that girls from violent homes may be more impacted by family violence than boys.

Boys, in the Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson and Zak (1986) study showed both externalising and internalising symptoms and a lower level of social competence. Whereas girls who witnessed violence showed more internalising symptoms, such as anxiety and depression, as well as lower social competency when compared to non-exposed girls.

Although studies that take gender disparity into account appear to be contradictory and their findings inconsistent, most of the evidence indicates greater maladjustment in girls as compared to boys. Cummings, Pepler and Moore (1999) in their study of gender differences in children exposed to interparental violence provided clear evidence that girls from such families were rated by their mothers as showing significantly

more maladjustment. This maladjustment extends far beyond traditional gender stereotypes, as the girls in the study showed high levels of externalising problems, such as aggression.

An observation from several studies is that children exposed to domestic violence do not seem to behave in a stereotypically gendered way. Davis and Carlson (1986) found that girls not only respond with passive-depressive behaviours stereotypical for their gender, but in certain age groups are more likely than boys to respond with atypical aggressive behaviours. Similarly, Copping's (1996) findings do not support stereotypical gender differences in behaviour. This study found that when females do respond by externalising their experiences of abuse they are likely to use aggressive behaviours such as hitting. Spaccarelli, Sandler and Roosa (1994) also found that girls, especially older girls, show more aggressive behaviour. Externalising behaviours may be repressed in girls, only becoming visible in adolescence (Carlson, 1996). Rossman, Hughes and Rosenberg (1999) found that girls show more avoidance and self-blame when younger, but in adolescence they could suffer from an agitated form of depression, which could include acting out.

Kerig (1998) suggests that girls may develop more externalised and aggressive behaviour due to intense feelings of anger towards their fathers. The quality of father-daughter interactions appears to vary in relation to parental marital satisfaction. In families with less marital satisfaction, fathers are more negative towards their daughters and the daughters themselves are less compliant towards their fathers.

Some studies have suggested that girls who have witnessed interparental violence exhibit more subtle effects that result in changes to their thinking and social perception. These girls may experience consequences that despite being deferred, manifest at a later stage of development. These subtle negative effects could, for example, be a negative attitude towards marriage or a distrust of males in general (Davis & Carlson, 1987).

Kerig (1998) examined the ways in which cognitive appraisals mediate the impact of interparental violence on children's adjustment in gender specific ways. The study found that boys and girls attend to different aspects of the conflict and respond to it differently. Perceived threat mediates the impact of violence on boy's anxiety. For girls self-blame mediates the relationship between violence and their internalising problems. Boys tend to approach conflict in action-oriented ways. Girls tend to internalise their distress by, for example, worrying about their responsibilities for maintaining their family's well being. Girls also pay particular attention to the emotional well being of their mothers. This study indicates that boys and girls make sense of their parent's conflicts and their own role in them, in ways specific to their gender.



Within the maritally violent family system the father may perceive and react to the mother and daughter as an enmeshed unit. Fathers identify their daughters with their wives and as a result experience increased anger towards them. Daughters, having their own pain and anger, are also extremely sensitive to the pain that their mothers are in. They may also vicariously experience her anger. This results in them being less cooperative and experiencing more rage towards their fathers. This leads to high rates of father daughter conflict, with girls receiving more verbal aggression from their fathers than boys (Cummings, Pepler & Moore, 1999; Kerig, 1998).

#### **5.2.5.1 Gender Identification**

Females and males encounter problematic gender roles when growing up in a home with marital violence. Witnessing their father using violence against their mother affects the development of their own gendered identities. This can occur in various ways. The child may either identify with the same sex parent, in other words, males will identify with the aggression of their fathers, and females with the victim status of their mothers. Alternatively, they may distance themselves from identification with same-sex parent. Either option would impact on their own gender development (Cummings, Pepler & Moore, 1999).

The different ways that witnessing parental violence affects males and females could relate to gender role socialisation. Early gender socialisation for these children is atypical because in maritally violent homes prohibitions against hitting women are violated. Girls may become more aggressive because at an early age they do not see the undercontrolled behaviour of either parent as dissonant with the female role and may begin to emulate this behaviour (Cummings, Pepler & Moore, 1999).

Boys may become aggressive because aggression is seen as appropriate for males. They learn attitudes that approve of violence against women by seeing their father's violence towards their mothers. This may strengthen their acceptance of violence as an appropriate behaviour. It may also provide a model for defining female partners as appropriate victims of violence (Ulrich & Huber, 1981).

Another way of accounting for gender differences, is same-sex identification, whereby children develop self-concepts that mirror the self-concepts of their same-sex parent. They are seriously effected by witnessing violence through the disruption of their relationship with their same sex parent at a time in their lives when identification with them is strong and essential to their development (Davis & Carlson, 1986).



Elbow (1982) states that seeing one's father using violence against one's mother may impact on positive gender identification. Children do not want to identify with the aggression of the perpetrator, nor with the powerlessness of the victim. Both boys and girls are offered problematic gender roles in this situation, which may impact negatively on the way they see the opposite sex, as well as themselves. Maleness may be mistrusted through its association with destructive behaviour. Femaleness may be associated with victim status. Children may believe that the victim has brought the abuse upon herself, through her behaviour or because she is a woman. This may generalise into negativity towards women in general.

Mullender and Morley (1994) confirm that witnessing male domination and female submission impacts upon the development of children's own gender identities. Some boys may distance themselves from aggressive versions of masculinity by identifying strongly with their mothers. Some girls may blame their mothers for their passive role, and distance themselves from traditional femininity.

Identification with the same-sex parent is particularly strong in school age and adolescent development. Sex differences in the effects of violence could be due to the stronger identification of girls with their mothers. Girls might respond more seriously to witnessing domestic violence because they have developed a strong identification with their mother who, as the victim of marital violence, is devalued in the marital relationship. These girls are mature enough to recognise her victimisation, yet insufficiently mature to cope effectively with it (Cummings, Pepler & Moore, 1999; Spaccarelli, Sandler & Roosa, 1994).

Cummings, Pepler and Moore (1999) suggest that a basic gender difference in interpersonal positioning would account for girls' greater maladjustment. Girls are more sensitive to the affective cues and states of other people, and show greater prosocial awareness. Their relational behaviour may be due to their innate disposition or to gender socialisation, where traditional cultural mores encourage girls to stay in close proximity to their homes. The social context of the family may therefore be more important for girls than for boys, influencing girl's psychosocial development more significantly.

Girls appear to be more sensitive to the affective states of their parents. Because of this salient interpersonal context girls may find it more difficult to process the intense, vicarious feelings of terror, sadness, anger and helplessness that are aroused when they witness violence. These emotions are difficult to regulate and may result in a chronic form of distress, which would impact on their optimal and healthy development (Cummings, Pepler & Moore, 1999).

## **5.2.6 SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Making and maintaining friendships are a crucial aspect of a child's development. Negative effects on peer relationships are a significant consequence of violence in the home. Children may be afraid to bring friends home for fear of violence taking place. They also experience a sense of shame and stigmatisation making it difficult to make friendships. Moving homes also makes it difficult to maintain friendships (McGee, 2000; Mullender, et al., 2002).

External support from peers, significant adults and the school system is vital. Wagar and Rodway (1995) found that children with some outside social support system showed less behavioural adjustment problems than those without such external supports. These relationships provide children with a sense of autonomy, enabling them to develop communication skills, and they give them a sense that they are important. Being integrated into the community can serve as a buffering agent from the effects of family violence. Due to their isolation, however, many children are unable to benefit from connections within their communities (Mullender, et al., 2002; Pepler, Catallo & Moore, 2000).

McCloskey, Figueredo and Koss (1995) explored the extent to which social support could buffer children from the harmful effects of witnessing violence. It appears that even if support is available it cannot entirely buffer the child as, when the source of stress resides within the family, and when serious aggression takes place, the affiliation and nurturing offered is less likely to be mitigate the damage. Nevertheless, a warm and emotionally strong relationship with the non-abusive parent or another adult can moderate the effects of marital violence on children. The presence of this supportive relationship can reduce the impact of exposure practically and emotionally. The adult, for example, might ensure that the child is out of harm's way during a violent episode, or be able to comfort them afterwards. Emotionally the relationship provides security, and can raise the child's self-esteem (Humphreys, 1993; Kaufman & Zigler, 1987).

Relationships outside of the family allow for the experience of alternative patterns of relating that are different from what their parents have modelled for them. By helping the child to give meaning to the violent events, these adults can assist them in the generating of resilience. From supportive and nurturing relationships these children can learn the value of affection and caring, and find that there are other ways to attain love and respect (Berman, 1993; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

### **5.2.7 RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN**

Most of the existing literature on child witnessing of domestic violence is pathology-oriented, providing information on problems and impairments. A medical model is often used, which makes many assumptions with regard to children's responses. Criticism is growing for this narrow perspective which tends to view children exposed to domestic violence as inevitably and irreversibly damaged by the experience (Angless & Shefer, 1997).

There is very little focus on the resilience of the children, the ways they cope with their situations, or the protective factors that may buffer the impact. An alternative approach focusing on their resourcefulness is essential in order to understand the range and dimension of their experience more completely (Edelson, 1999; Humphreys, 1993; Peled & Davis, 1995).

Criticism also exists for the view that children have a common response to this experience. The idea that all children are similarly affected is not useful, as it removes from the child their ability to have choice and take action. It also denies them the chance to demonstrate their strengths and resilience, and prove that they have the ability to overcome their traumatic experiences (Angless & Shefer, 1997).

Berman (1993) defines resilience within the context of the violent family as the child effectively coping, and being able to restore or maintain their equilibrium under threatening circumstances. It appears as if many children can learn lessons from their experience of parental violence that could lead to the development of a resilient identity.

While some children who have been exposed to domestic violence are adversely affected, others appear to have the resources to survive what they have experienced without developing severe problems and symptoms. Psychopathology can therefore never be presumed. Many children survive within normal levels of functioning and remain relatively well adjusted. It seems as if children are not left with only negative outcomes from their experience, and it would be incorrect to stereotype all children who have had witnessed violence as inevitably and permanently harmed (Berman, 2000; Carlson, 1990; 1996; Jouriles, Murphy & O'Leary, 1994; Mullender & Morley, 1994; Mullender, et al., 2002).

What Jouriles, Murphy and O'Leary (1989) note in their study is that while half of the children who participated displayed problems at clinical cut-off levels, the other half did not. This stresses the need to identify resilience factors that would account for 50% of these children remaining relatively unaffected.

Many children show remarkable strength, resourcefulness and resilience in the face of domestic violence (Hughes, 1982; McGee, 2000; Sullivan, Bybee, & Allen, 2002). It is vital therefore to examine the strengths,

resources, resilience and optimal coping of exposed children (Magen, Conroy, McCartt, Panciera, & Levy, 2001).

### **5.2.7.1 Making Meaning of Witnessing Marital Violence**

There are a great many possible forms that children's exposure to domestic violence can take, from direct and indirect witnessing, to intervening, to living in a home where violence occurs. Beyond the awareness that children are present during many violent attacks, little is known about children's attempts to create meaning of their experience. How they make sense of the violence is a critical factor in how it affects them (Mullender & Morley, 1994; Wagar & Rodway, 1995).

Living with violence in the home is the context within which children find their meaning and make sense of their own responses and emotions. It is important to recognise and value this contextual dimension, as it is inseparable from the ways in which they attempt to bring a sense of coherence into their lives (Berman, 2000; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

Contrary to the notion of children as passive victims Mullender et al. (2002) describe these children as having their own strategies for coping and their own individual perspectives, reactions and ways of making meaning of the experience. There is no single response pattern, and no syndrome that captures the impact of their exposure to violence. While the child can be seen to be under the power and control of the abusive parent, they still have agency within their own lives. They are able to actively search for their own meanings and understandings, bearing reliable witness to their own experiences.

These children have to find a way to make sense of what takes place in their homes and their lives, and to cope with the many and varied consequences of the violence. Making sense of the abuse is intertwined with many complex issues which inevitably affect the development of the child's own sense of identity. It must also be understood that children make meaning of witnessing violence within a developmental context, and there are many similar themes and common patterns in their stories (Berman, 2000; Marans & Adelman, 1997).

It is vital to examine the ideas about violence that exist within our culture, in order to be able to help those who have been affected by violence to unravel and understand what has happened to them, and to facilitate their making sense of the situation. Despite the extreme effects, many children have been able to learn valuable things from what they have termed their "nightmare lessons" (Mullender, et al., 2002, p.109).

### 5.2.8 CHILDREN'S CONTROL BELIEFS AND COPING STRATEGIES

Coping involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioural management of a situation that involves internal and external demands that are appraised as putting strain upon, or exceeding, the individual's resources. The stress and coping framework draws attention to the processes of how the individual adapts to adversity. Coping behaviours can be positive or negative in terms of immediate, short-term and long-term adaptation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1991).

Generally children find many ways to survive and cope with their adverse circumstances. Their very development takes place within contexts where they learn to use strategies to survive, to make sense of what is happening to them and to deal with their emotions. They need not be dependent and passive in these situations (Mullender & Morley, 1994; Mullender, et al., 2002).

Children's attributions and reactions to marital violence are associated with their unique perceptions of the violence. Their perceptions influence their degree of attention to the violence, their memory of it, and its potential impact on their adjustment. Attitudes, personal responsibility for the abuse and self-blame are important facets influencing how children perceive and react to the conflict (Duggan, O'Brien & Kennedy, 2001; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

Due to their egocentricity, children tend to interpret most events in their lives in relation to themselves. This egocentricity is part of a developmental phenomenon that may result in children from violent homes believing that they are responsible for the conflict. This can be exacerbated by arguments the parents may have about their children, which take place before the conflict escalates into violence. Children can feel a strong sense of failure for not being able to prevent the anger and violence, and end up feeling guilty, inadequate and helpless (Carlson, 1996; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

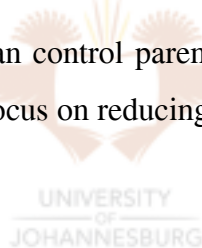
Children who witness marital violence have little sense of predictability and perceived control over the events in their lives. This is because there is little, if anything, that they can do to stop the violence. This contributes to them developing an external locus of control. But those who believe that they can control the violence are at risk for more severe problems. Children from violent families who hold on to the belief that they can control the violence through their behaviour, for example by being good, have lower self-esteem than those who do not hold these beliefs (Kerig, 1998; Moore, Catallo & Pepler, 2000; Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Davies and Cummings (1994) found that violence and conflict threaten a child's sense of emotional security. If it is unresolved children appear more distressed and have more negative reactions. Children also experience more distress if they involve themselves in the conflict.

Grych and Fincham (1990) used a cognitive-contextual model to examine the processes underlying the effects of marital conflict. They looked at the content of the marital conflict, whether or not it was about the child, its severity and frequency, and whether or not it was resolved. These properties of the conflict impact upon the child's coping strategies and attributions of responsibility. These findings draw attention to children's active attempts to interpret the significance of, and search for the meaning behind, their parent's arguments. Children also look for their own contribution to causing or solving their parent's problems. Appraisals such as self-blame and perceptions of threat mediate the impact of marital conflict on their adjustment. The frequency, intensity and especially how the conflict is resolved contribute significantly to the outcome for the child.

Children may develop something that Ross (in Angless & Shefer, 1997) terms 'auto-phobia', which describes the fears children have of their own behaviour and the intensity of their own emotions. As they witness their parents losing control they can become concerned about how they will manage their own feelings of anger. They may feel guilty and anxious with regard to their anger, and a specific fear may develop about what they might do to the abuser if they themselves lose control.

It is risky for children to believe that they can control parental behaviours that are beyond their sphere of influence. It is more worthwhile for them to focus on reducing their own emotional distress as far as possible (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).



### **5.3 SILENCE AND SECRECY**

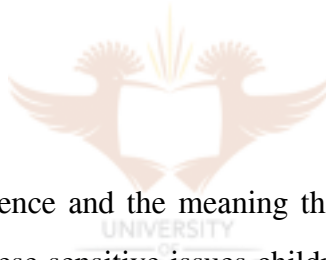
Violent families keep shared secrets from the outside world. Children are not encouraged to talk about their experiences and may develop a habit of silence. Out of fear, shame or protectiveness of their parents, many children are reluctant to disclose the violence taking place in their homes. They may appear guarded and evasive about their family situation, with the tendency to minimise and even deny what is occurring. This conspiracy of silence teaches them to lie and accept dishonesty for the family's sake (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990; McCloskey, Figueredo & Koss, 1995).

Because this code of family secrecy has been ingrained over a long period of time, children are often too afraid to seek help or may not even realise that they have that choice. The children may feel or even be vulnerable to retribution from the perpetrator if they talk about the violence. They may also be punished for

talking to outsiders, or threatened with being cut off from the family should they do so (Sudermann & Jaffe, 1999).

Mothers may experience feelings of guilt, shame and fear, which interfere with their ability to communicate about their problems. They may want to protect their offspring, not realising how much their children are aware of. Children may sense information is being withheld, causing them to become confused and anxious. Because they are seldom given full information, children may construct ideas about what has taken place, based on what they may have seen, heard or imagined. The children themselves may keep silent about what they know, or begin to withhold information to protect themselves or their parents, and thus a conspiracy of silence develops (Mullender, et al., 2002).

There is a high level of shame and secrecy attached to the violence, and this is combined with the developmental level of the child and the trauma the child has experienced. Eventually the stories of their experiences need to be told, and alternative stories of strength and resilience accessed and created (Rabenstein & Lehmann, 2000).



### **5.3.1 WHEN SILENCE IS BROKEN**

Children's subjective experience of violence and the meaning that develops out of these traumatic events needs to be explored. In talking about these sensitive issues children can increase their understanding about the dynamics of violence, see their role in it for what it is, and improve their chances of coping and survival through expressing their emotions (Berman, 2000).

The phrase "breaking the silence" is used in intervention groups. It gives a sense of the tangible nature of the emotional isolation these children experience. They need to learn to break this silence, being supported throughout the process. They need guidance about whether or not it is safe or appropriate to talk about family issues. They need assistance in understanding the difference between secrecy, privacy and confidentiality. In this way they become more empowered to share their stories (Peled & Edelson, 1995; Rabenstein & Lehmann, 2000).

These children have an enormous need to be listened to, believed and supported. But years of secrecy and silence make it difficult for them to discuss what has happened in their lives. This may lead to them not being able to express their feelings or talk about their experiences. When they do begin to disclose what has taken place they can start to make sense of their experiences, clear up misconceptions and improve their emotional wellbeing (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990; Mullender, et al., 2002).



Talking is made easier if they find out that there are others who have shared their experiences. It is especially important that they accept that it is not their fault. Although talking about the violence is extremely difficult for mothers and their children, honesty needs to be encouraged. A context of safety and someone to facilitate their discussions enables them to begin this process (Mullender & Morely, 1994).

When adults, such as parents, teachers and counsellors, raise issues related to domestic violence, and are comfortable discussing them openly, children will be more open to disclosing and discussing their own problems related to the violence within their families (Pepler, Catallo & Moore, 2000).

### **5.3.2 SILENCE, SECRECY AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Abusers go to great lengths to reduce the possibility of detection of the violence and to prevent the family receiving any assistance from outsiders. They can be extremely controlling and may try to isolate their wives and children. They do this by reducing or forbidding socialising and social contact with others (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990; Pepler, Catallo & Moore, 2000).

Children may avoid intimate friendships out of fear of revealing the violence and abuse in their families. They may be reluctant to bring friends home for fear that aggression may suddenly occur. They are also afraid of sharing their experiences because if the relationship ends their friends might tell others. They may feel that others would stop caring and supporting them, or find them unworthy, if the violence was revealed (Mullender, et al., 2002).

This conspiracy of silence is a trap that serves to isolate the children. They develop skills in secrecy and concealment, learning to hide the violence at all costs. This could lead to many children leading lonely and very private lives, expressing their emotions in secret and muting their responses. They need permission and encouragement to talk openly, and to understand that they are not betraying their parents or being disloyal to them by talking about what has happened (Mullender, et al., 2002; Pepler, Catallo & Moore, 2000).

Berman (2000) compared children who have experienced war and children who live with domestic violence. She found that while their experiences are very different they are also very similar. Both groups have witnessed atrocities, the difference is that for children of war the experience is a collective one, but witnesses of domestic violence have an isolated experience.

Children of war described childhoods where they felt secure in their place in the world. The violence that occurred was sudden, but temporary. This is contrasted with witnesses of domestic violence, whose early years were marked by constant, unpredictable fighting and fear. These children did not know a life of peace



prior to their conflicted beginning and violence for them was the defining feature of family life. For both groups the effects continued long after the violence ceased.

Despite the similarities, the experience of these two groups is qualitatively different. Wars are fought in public. In the home the fight is private. There are no rules of fair play, especially if the family is successful in keeping it hidden. The shame and embarrassment experienced by child witnesses of domestic violence is contrasted to the communally experienced violence of war (Berman, 2000).

## **5.4 FAMILY FACTORS AFFECTING THE RESPONSE OF CHILDREN TO EXPOSURE**

The institution of the family is the most basic unit of society. A family can be defined as a group of people related by blood, marriage or adoption. They are linked by kin connections and are responsible for reproduction, caring for and supporting each other. Ideally the family is thought to be a safe-haven of love, where the closely connected network of kin provide support, protection, and safety against threat. The emphasis is on unity, harmony, and tension reduction (Manabe, 2001).

The family has alternatively been described as the cradle of violence, and possibly the most patriarchal system within society. The family is crucial in the task of socialising the next generation in developing morals, values, a sense of self, norms of interaction and ways of being. It is here too that the child learns the first lessons of hierarchy, domination, subordination and discrimination. In terms of social learning theory, the family is the place of instruction, where through imitation and the examples of role models, children are conditioned to behave in certain ways (Stark & Flitcraft, in Manabe, 2001).

### **5.4.1 THE CHARACTERISTICS AND DYNAMICS OF VIOLENT FAMILIES**

Society reinforces the idea of the family as a peaceful safe-haven of love and harmony, secluded from the demands and intrusions of everyday life. This myth is shattered with knowledge of the widespread violence taking place within the family. Because of its privacy and insularity the family is isolated from outside involvement and resources. It can therefore be a very unsafe place, where extremely destructive behaviours can, and do, take place (Segal & Labe, 1990).

Patriarchal society creates a division between the public and private spheres of life. While the family is not entirely separate from other social processes, a division between the 'public' and the 'private' is created. This has very definite implications for wife abuse. It reinforces the idea of the family as a private institution,

which can serve to hide wife abuse from public view. As wife abuse is considered a private matter between husband and wife, it is not seen as a social problem and not met with appropriate social sanction (Angless & Shefer, 1997; Mashishi, 1998).

The family has been described as society's most violent institution. Its social organisation exists within a cultural context within which violence is tolerated, condoned, and accepted, making it a natural context for interpersonal conflict (Duggan, O'Brien & Kennedy, 2001; Gelles, 1997). According to Mashishi (1998) there is a general acceptance in South Africa that intra-familial violence is justifiable and acceptable.

Gelles (1997) identifies eleven characteristics that make the family as potentially violent, as it is warm, supportive and intimate: (1) the amount of time spent interacting together; (2) the range of activities and interests engaged in; (3) the intensity of involvement of family members; (4) the impinging nature of family activities; (5) the right to bear influence on each other's values, attitudes and behaviours; (6) age and sex differences; (7) assigned roles and responsibilities; (8) the private and insular nature of the family; (9) that membership is involuntary; (10) the stress prone nature of the family; and, (11) the extensive and intimate knowledge of each member's social biography.

The family should play a crucial role in preventing and protecting children from traumatic experiences. But violent homes have several characteristics that place children's well being and development at risk. These include lack of stability and consistency, as well as ongoing, unresolved conflict. In a violent home children are traumatised because of the family environment. Children would normally turn to their parents for support and guidance, but in violent families the parents themselves are the source of the anguish (Cummings, Pepler & Moore, 1999; Wilson, 1997).

The acts of violence occurring between parents are not the only influence on children's negative adjustment. Patterns of violence create a climate in the home that is tangibly distressing to the child. The effects of this climate of fear and unpredictability cannot be underestimated (Mullender & Morley, 1994; Sudermann & Jaffe, 1999).

Violence damages interpersonal relationships. Intimate relationships that are infused with caring and trust are nurtured firstly in one's family of origin. All domestic violence negates loving and caring between family members and creates abuse of parental power. In the end trust is damaged and family closeness undermined. Violence then becomes part of the repertoire of family interactions and may then become incorporated into relationships outside of the family (McKendrick & Hoffman, 1990).

A multitude of risk factors may be present in violent families, such as parental psychiatric disorders, neglect, substance abuse, and verbal conflict. The verbal and emotional abuse that accompanies physical violence has a significant impact on children's adjustment. These factors may have a cumulative effect on children's psychological well-being and behaviour (Fantuzzo, Mohr & Noone, 2000; Maker, Kemmelmeier & Peterson, 1998; Sudermann & Jaffe, 1999).

Alcohol is present in about 50% of all cases of wife assault, although it is seen as a correlational factor rather than as a cause of the violence. Abuse of alcohol adds to the family's dysfunction and can lead to other consequences, such as unemployment, that place the family under further stress (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

Family contextual factors play a significant role in the outcome of children exposed to family violence. Family stress is seen to be one of the primary factors that effect children. This stress is mediated by other factors such as caretaker distress and partner violence. Because violence induces stress within the family and narrows choices there is also a decline in family strengths, family satisfaction, pleasurable activities and positive interactions (Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 1997; Salzinger, et al., 2002).

Jouriles, Murphy and O'Leary (1989) found a link between marital aggression and the frequency and severity of problems in children. They looked at whether the relationship between marital aggression and problematic child behaviour is due to their shared association with marital discord. The study confirmed that physical marital aggression contributes unique variance to child problems such as conduct disorder, inadequacy, immaturity and clinical levels of problem behaviours. Wife abuse appears to predict child problems independently of marital discord.

The extended family can experience the radiating effects of domestic violence. Abuse creates estrangement and other family members may become alienated from the abused woman. She may cut her ties with her family either to appease the batterer or to try to hide the violence. The family may withdraw from the battered woman due to feelings of frustration or confusion. In addition they may be intimidated by the abuser's threats and actions towards them. Their retreat would have serious consequences for the children involved as they would be deprived of a significant source of social support. This would contribute to their isolation and neglect (Mashishi, 1998).

Rossmann, Hughes and Rosenberg (1999) discuss three domains of parenting in violent families: Parenting stress and the emotional availability of abused mothers to their children; the attachment and emotional

security needs of the children; and the parenting practices of the parents. These areas will be covered in the following sections on parenting in violent homes.

#### **5.4.2 THE EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON MOTHERS**

Children suffer in many ways from living in a violent home. Domestic violence questions parental fitness in many different ways. Due to the abuser's focus on controlling the victim and the victim's focus on survival their ability to parent is often compromised and undermined. The abused woman may begin to believe the perpetrator's criticisms that they are terrible mothers, and thereby lose confidence in their ability to parent (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).

Psychological and physical abuse undoubtedly effect women's experience of motherhood, their abilities to parent and the quality of the mother-child relationship. It adds to parenting stress and affects parenting behaviours. It affects mother's relationships with and feelings towards their children. It affects their sense of identity as mothers and as women. They experience many conflicts, contradictions and inconsistencies within their mothering role, but their experience of mothering under these circumstances is seldom acknowledged (Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2000; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

In contexts of domestic violence children's needs for reassurance and support are intensified, yet it is during such times that mother's abilities to meet these needs are depleted. It is not coincidental that abusers try to target and undermine their wife's mothering abilities. As it is one of her most important sources of positive identity it is also an area of great vulnerability (Mullender, et al., 2002).

The quality of parenting by the non-violent parent is an important moderating variable for children's adjustment. Because parental functioning is vulnerable to stressful circumstances, diminished parenting may occur if the mother suffers from depression and traumatic symptoms. Parenting can therefore become a vulnerability factor. But if the mother manages to remain nurturing, her parenting serves a protective function (Levendovsky & Graham-Bermann, 1998).

Mothers can become isolated from their social support systems. Due to diminished contact with family, friends and the community, they receive little feedback that could help them to evaluate what is happening in their family. This results in a distorted view of what constitutes normal and acceptable behaviour in a

marriage. These women can then become increasingly desensitised to the escalating violence in their lives (Rosenberg & Giberson, 1999).

Holden and Ritchie (1991) describe ways in which parenting in violent, discordant families contribute to child problems. Due to maternal stress, mothers can be less emotionally available to their children. They can be more negative and irritable, and less positive when using discipline. They can have fewer positive interactions with their children. The interactions they do have can be angry and bitter. Discipline may be punitive, controlling, inconsistent and harsh. In the McCloskey, Figueredo and Koss (1995) study differences in parenting styles and behaviours were found when comparing abused and non-abused mothers. Maternal warmth was found to be considerably lower in the battered mothers' group.

Levendovsky and Graham-Bermann (2001) assessed whether the effects of domestic violence on children were mediated by the mother's psychological functioning. They suggested that a violent context traumatises the mother and affects parenting behaviours, such as warmth, self-control, child-centeredness and parenting effectiveness. A significant relationship was found, firstly between the frequency and severity of the mother's abuse by her husband and her trauma symptoms, and secondly, between these trauma symptoms and her maternal warmth, self-control and effectiveness. Increased trauma symptomatology were found to be strongly associated with decreased maternal warmth, control and effectiveness.

In this study Levendovsky and Graham-Bermann (2000) found that the psychological trauma experienced by mothers is an important mechanisms through which violence impacts on parenting. There are two possible outcomes for parenting. The first is that there is no change in parenting, and the mother increases her parental functioning to compensate, remaining effective and consistent. But given that domestic violence tends to escalate and is often chronic, it is uncertain whether her parenting effectiveness will be maintained. The second possibility is that the trauma will cause a decline in her ability to parent. The authors suggest that parenting oscillates between periods of disengagement, withdrawal and anger, and periods of being warm, nurturing, and loving. This study also found that the impact of marital violence on parenting was mediated by marital satisfaction, lack of social support and stressful life events.

#### **5.4.2.1 The Mother-Child Relationship**

The relationship between battered mothers and their children is a very complex one, often filled with tension (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000). Ambivalence is very evident in their feelings towards her. Children may pity

their mother but simultaneously dislike her for being “weak”. Many expressed anger at her for what they perceived to be the emotional power, betrayal, lack of protection and inconsistency shown towards them (Elbow, 1982; Wagar & Rodway, 1995).

Children also show a wide range of caring and protective behaviours towards their mothers. Support and providing instrumental help were attempts to alleviate some of her burdens. These actions served to enhance the relationship between mother and child, which could be important in mediating some of the long-term effects of witnessing violence (Humphreys, 1993).

Many children are not aware of their mother’s struggles regarding the abuse and their mothering abilities. Few mothers appear to talk to their children about the violence. This is for several reasons, such as believing they are protecting their children. They might also be protecting themselves, as focusing on the violence and discussing it are difficult. This can lead to a lack of understanding of each other’s needs and a lack of openness and directness in their relationship. Patterns of secrecy, silence and fear, combined with the need to protect one another from painful awareness of the situation may be hard to change at a later stage. This could affect their relationship well into the future (Mullender & Morley, 1994; Mullender, et al., 2002).

One way to protect children from the harmful effects of domestic violence is to improve the psychological well being of their mothers. This can be done by reducing her levels of depression and stress. It is vital that mother’s have access to the assistance they require in order to be able to meet their child’s needs as safely and quickly as possible (Huth-Bocks, Levendovsky & Semel, 2001; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

#### **5.4.2.2 Maternal Stress and Depression**

Maternal stress impacts on a mother’s sense of herself as a parent, and her perception of her relationship with her child. It is an important moderating variable, having a direct and significant effect on a child’s emotional and behavioural adjustment. Children responded to the effects of their mother’s stress over and above the effects of the domestic violence. In addition it is associated with increases in internalising, externalising and total child behaviour problems. Studies examining the impact of domestic violence on mothering found that maternal parenting stress was higher in violent families than in matched nonviolent families (Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Levendovsky & Graham-Berman, 1998; 2001).

A study by Holden and Ritchie (1991) found that maternal stress was strongly associated with problems in children. Mothers who are functioning well and coping in their parenting tasks can serve to buffer some of the harmful effects of their child's exposure to domestic violence. But under conditions of abuse these mothers endure extreme strain, which can impact on the quality of their parenting.

The Cummings, Pepler and Moore (1999) study linked interparental violence and children's behaviour problems. This appeared to be as a result of changed parenting practices that come about through maternal stress. Their study found that maternal stress affects adjustment in boys and girls differently. If the mothers displayed positive social characteristics, and problem solving abilities, were optimistic, had higher levels of education, intelligence, maturity and stability, their daughters appeared more competent and well adjusted.

Due to the many factors associated with abuse, including high levels of stress, battered mothers are at greater risk of drug and alcohol dependence. They are also likely to attempt suicide as a result of depression associated with being abused (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).

#### **5.4.2.3 Maternal Discipline**

In violent families the mother is of major importance to her children as she is the primary caregiver and provider of emotional support. If the discipline given by her is harsh and punitive or she is aggressive towards her child the effects will be extremely negative (O'Keefe, 1994).

Children of battered women are at a high risk of being abused themselves. Mothers experience several problems due to the abuse itself, for example, high levels of stress and economic pressures. The trying experience of mothering under these conditions may lead to their frustrations being taken out on their children. Such mothers may use violence against their children despite having been the victims of violence themselves (Giles-Sims, 1985; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

#### **5.4.2.4 Role Confusion**

The boundaries between parent and child are often blurred in violent homes. Conflict between the parents destroys the possibility of a strong parental coalition being established. This creates the opportunity for strong alliances to form between one of the parents and their children (Angless & Shefer, 1997).

Children from violent homes are often pushed into fulfilling a parental role. They may have to care for siblings and often their mothers as well. The mother may develop an overly close and enmeshed relationship with their children. Children, in turn, may act as parents to their mothers, in a reversal of roles. Mothers may rely inappropriately on their children for affection, support and guidance, with children becoming their confidants. When children are so finely-tuned in to their mother's emotions they may be less able to identify their own feeling states and less able to act on their own behalf (Elbow, 1982; Rosenberg & Giberson, 1999; Stephens, 1999).

These excessive and inappropriate demands placed on the children are detrimental to their wellbeing, resulting in their psychological and developmental needs being neglected. They may struggle to cope with the weight of their situation and the demands placed on them by their parents, while not being afforded any of the protection or attention they need (Stephens, 1999).

Adultification according to Stephens (1999) involves attributing malicious and complex motives onto children who do not have the cognitive capacity to be responsible for such motives. The child may be viewed by one partner as embodying the despised characteristics of their antagonistic partner, and may take on the blame in their place. If, for example, the child is perceived as being similar to the abuser their actions may be interpreted as carrying hostile intent, and they are treated according to these projections.

#### **5.4.2.5 Maternal Protection and Buffering**

Given their nurturing role and closeness to their children mothers can provide a protective influence which can help to buffer the effects of exposure to violence. But due to the many stressors and lack of resources, and given the demanding task of parenting, some mothers do not achieve the level of nurturance, protection and support their children require (Pepler, Catallo & Moore, 2000).

Battered mothers respond to their children in different ways. Some try to actively protect and nurture their children, while others are more passive and inactive. A deeper understanding is required of what accounts for these types of responses. While the trauma of being assaulted contributes, it does not entirely account for the different ways of responding. The effect of marital violence on mothering behaviour may be mediated by the mother's internal mental representation of herself, her child and what she sees as appropriate mothering. Her own attachment experiences play a vital role in these expectations (Stephens, 1999).



Attempts at protection may take the form of concealment of the violence by some mothers. Many abused mothers make a concerted effort to protect their children by going to great lengths to hide their abuse. They are aware that witnessing the violence has a negative impact on their children and are concerned about the effects. Denying or minimising the abuse can be considered a coping strategy on their part, as well as their way of protecting their children (Mullender & Morley, 1994).

As described above children's relationships with their mothers are complicated. It appears from the literature that their relationships with their fathers are equally, if not more, complicated and confusing. In this significant relationship one finds fear and love uncomfortably co-existing.

### **5.4.3 MARITALLY VIOLENT MEN AS FATHERS**

Given the evidence that some children exposed to interparental violence suffer more detrimental effects than others, there is a need to look at all the factors that mediate and moderate children's responses. As discussed above, parental well-being and behaviour are significant influences on children's adjustment. Despite this, very few studies contain data on the impact of the abusive partner, especially in their role as father. The neglect in the literature on the father-child relationship is in sharp contrast with the focus on the mother-child relationship. As fathers would be likely to be actively involved in parenting their children, their role is an important mediator in their child's adjustment (Edelson, 1999; Sullivan, Juras, Bybee, Nguyen & Allen, 2000).

Children have complex and difficult relationships with their abusive fathers. Being aware of the abuse towards their mothers some may not want to have any further contact with their fathers. But despite feeling hatred and fear towards him, their love for him continues. Children have to be assisted in making sense of this confusion and ambivalence (Park, Fedler & Dangor, 2000).

Mullender et al. (2002) mention that it is not the absent father that is the problem, but the present and abusive father, who finds it difficult to consider their children's needs for affection and respect. There appears to be a glaring absence of awareness on the part of violent fathers that their behaviour has a serious and negative impact on their children.

The abusive father has a major impact on the emotional climate of the family. Fathers who are violent display several aversive personality characteristics. These personality characteristics interact with the effects of witnessing domestic violence. A batterer is often characterised by negative affectivity, lower impulse control, low self-esteem, a heightened response to stimuli, has poorer problem-solving skills, more hostility,

high stress levels, suffers from depression and shows increased irritability. Furthermore they are likely to use drugs and alcohol which serve to disinhibit aggression. They have been found to be emotionally distant from their children, uninvolved, and used power tactics to control them (Barnett, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 1997).

#### **5.4.3.1 Paternal Behaviour and Discipline**

Paternal anger is strongly linked to child problems. According to maternal reports violent fathers are not as involved in the upbringing of their children, tend to use more negative control in the form of physical punishment and aggression, and are more irritable in their child-rearing behaviours. They use less physical affection and have fewer positive interactions with their children (Holden & Ritchie, 1991).

Violent fathers' behaviour can cause many concerns. There is concern that the discipline used may be too harsh and they might lose control. Any physical punishment of the child would clearly need to be within acceptable codes of conduct and not border on the abusive. Mothers may find it difficult to separate their children being physically punished from their own experiences of physical violence from the same person (McGee, 2000). From the child's perspective, having seen their father assault their mother would make any disciplining or verbal threats from him more frightening (McCloskey, Figueredo & Koss, 1995).

#### **5.4.3.2 Emotional Abuse of Children by their Fathers**

There are many different types of emotional abuse that children from violent homes are exposed to directly. These can have a profound and long-lasting effect. A feature of this type of abuse is its humiliating nature. Batterers appear to use the same techniques to control their children that they use to control their wives. Controlling their children's behaviour could take various forms. Examples of this type of abuse are, not allowing children to play, restricting their movement inside the home, and insisting children are quiet at all times (McGee, 2000).

Their father's emotional and verbal abuse of their mothers is also extremely frightening to the children. The aggressive shouting and overpowering behaviour create a tense atmosphere in the home, causing children to feel a pervading sense of intimidation and fear. Father's behaviours towards their children are often caused by jealousy. They may resent all forms of mother and child contact and want to be the center of their wife's attention (Mullender, et al., 2002).

The abusive husband may or may not have the intention of hurting their children directly during violent incidents. They may nevertheless be reckless with regard to their children's safety, especially as the violence escalates. This would increase the risk of the children being injured during assaults on their partners (McGee, 2000).

#### **5.4.3.3 Children's Relationships With Their Fathers**

There is something particularly disturbing and painful about witnessing one's own father acting violently and abusively towards one's mother. That this causes ambivalent and even hostile feelings towards him is not surprising (Sullivan, et al., 2000).

Edelson (1999) comments that due to witnessing violence against their mother, a child's relationship to their father becomes strained and problematic. Children exhibit complex emotions towards their fathers. They seem to love and be frightened of him at the same time, expressing deep ambivalence about this significant relationship. They experience conflicting feelings such as affection, dependence, resentment, pain and disappointment. Whatever their feelings, it is clear that children's lives are marked by having a violent father.

The McGee (2000) study found that most children exposed to domestic violence are afraid and wary of their fathers. Many no longer feel close to him after witnessing him abuse their mothers. They feel angry, betrayed, let down and ashamed of him. Other children experience a conflict of emotions towards their fathers. While detesting the violence many children still like or love their fathers and wish to continue a relationship with him. These children struggled intensely with trying to understand how someone they love behaves in such a terrible way.

McNeal and Amato (1998) found that interparental violence was linked to poorer relationships between fathers and daughters than fathers and sons. The authors suggest that the relationship between fathers and sons is more resilient to the effects of domestic violence. This is possibly due to the difference in socialisation, as boys are socialised to be more aggressive, while girls are encouraged to be more passive. Sons may therefore experience less distress when witnessing their father's violence, than would daughters. Daughters may develop a fear of their fathers and a fear of male violence, whereas sons may identify with their father's aggression.

Additional conflict is created for children of either sex if the abusive father tries to negatively influence their relationship with their mothers. Fathers may do this by trying to turn them against her or attempting to coerce the children into taking sides with him against her (McGee, 2000).

#### **5.4.4 SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS**

Relationships with siblings are a very important aspect of children's lives. Siblings can provide comfort and support, and if the relationship is a close one, this can buffer the impact of marital conflict. Given the different ages of siblings they can occupy different roles for each other within the family. Older siblings may take on the responsibility of protecting and caring for their younger siblings, offering them support and assistance (Pepler, Catallo & Moore 2000).

Adolescent girls are often found to protect their younger siblings during violent incidents, giving support and reassurance. These responsibilities place an enormous burden on their shoulders and they often take this role into adulthood (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

Support from siblings may be more implicitly experienced than specifically acknowledged or discussed in detail. It has been found that siblings tend not to talk directly and openly to each other about what takes place in their homes (Mullender, et al., 2002).

Despite the support that is evident, it is unlikely that siblings could consistently and unfailingly provide a buffer for each other. Arguments, family conflict and lack of affection between parents are also associated with negative interactions between siblings. In some instances siblings may act out the aggression and imitate the use of power that they have witnessed between their parents, within their own relationships (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Differential treatment of siblings may also affect their relationship. Fathers in violent families tend to favour one child over another. In the majority of cases they appear to favour their sons over their daughters, and give them preferential treatment. This type of favouritism may have a detrimental long-term impact on sibling relationships (McGee, 2000; Mullender, et al., 2002).

#### **5.5 SITUATIONAL AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS**

The abuse of women is often seen as characteristic of 'problem families'. This places blame for the abuse squarely with the families involved. While there may be dysfunction and problems within many of these

families, the issue of violence and abuse needs to be considered as a wider societal problem, and placed within this broader context (Dangor, 1999).

Households with domestic violence are extremely vulnerable due to the presence of high levels of developmental risk factors. Examples of these factors are family stress, poverty, single-female headed households, low education level of the primary provider, maternal abuse, parental substance abuse, and parental psychopathology (Fantuzzo, Moore & Noone, 2000; McCloskey, Figueredo & Koss, 1995).

These multiple stressors can have a cumulative effect. The more stressors that are present in the child's environment, the more likely they are to negatively influence their psychological wellbeing. The factors associated with domestic violence, such as the length of time children live with the violence, parental separations, chronic marital discord, repeated moves, being economically disadvantaged or suffering neglect, may be as harmful to the children as the direct effects of exposure (Carlson, 1996; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

Domestic violence seldom occurs as a once-off event. Abusive episodes may increase in frequency and severity. The effects of exposure to wife abuse are considered to vary as a function of the duration of exposure. The greater the extent and duration of the violence the more likely it is for the effects to become long-term. When adverse living conditions are accompanied by frequent violent episodes the impact on children becomes acute. Children who witnessed a greater frequency, intensity and severity of violence show the most severe disturbances and the most adjustment problems (Berman, 1993; Carlson, 1996; Moore, et al., 2000).

Many children experience some type of violence in their lives, either at home or in their communities. In many cases the same child may experience more than one type of violence. They may be exposed to marital abuse, media violence, violence in the community and at school. The combined and cumulative impact on children of witnessing or experiencing multiple forms of violence could be devastating (Eckenrode, Powers & Garbarino, 1997; Edelson, 1999).

In many cases children need to accompany their mothers to domestic violence shelters. This would involve leaving their homes and possessions. By needing to ensure their physical safety, children who move to shelters may end up feeling more vulnerable. Shelter children are separated from their natural support systems, their familiar surroundings, their toys, friends and relatives. They also experience additional stressors while staying in the shelter. Shelter groups in many studies exhibit the lowest social competency,

feeling abandoned and becoming socially withdrawn. They also show the highest levels of internalising and externalising behaviour problems. This poorer functioning may be partly attributed to the disruptive experience of moving to a shelter (Fantuzzo, et al., 1991; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

### **5.5.1 SITUATIONAL FACTORS SPECIFIC TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT**

In South Africa there is a unique interplay between spatial dynamics and domestic violence. Many families live in small houses that are often overcrowded. In informal settlements conditions are even more overpopulated. Family interactions and conflict often take place in the same room, with everyone present. If violence erupts it does so within this confined space. Parents cannot retire to their bedroom to have an argument in private, and children cannot avoid the conflict by escaping to their bedrooms. These conditions of physical proximity dramatically increase the likelihood of children witnessing wife abuse (Mashishi, 1998).

A study comparing battered women's children from Italy and the United States suggests that children of abused mothers show similar psychological symptoms and profiles across ethnic groups. This confirms the cross-cultural nature of children's vulnerability to the effects of domestic violence (McCloskey, Treviso, Scionti & Pozzo, 2002).

Responses of children are dependent on their cultural contexts. This context includes the availability of material resources that may shape the child's responses to their situation. Within the South African context there is considerable inequality which affects access to resources. This is especially accurate when comparing urban and rural children, and those with higher or lower socioeconomic status (Angless & Shefer, 1997).

Very little research has been carried out on children from different ethnic groups who are exposed to domestic violence. This is an area that needs further investigation. These children not only have to live with violence at home but have to cope with racism in their own lives (Barnett Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 1997; Carlson, 1996; Edelson, 1999; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

## **5.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

A complex picture is painted of the protective and vulnerability factors of children exposed to domestic violence. While each factor is complicated in itself, the sequelae of witnessing domestic violence become

especially complex as factors combine and interact. Amongst the factors are those pertaining to the child, including their developmental level, age, temperament and gender. It is also important to identify and encourage resilience and strength, as well as endeavours to make meaning of what they have been exposed to. Conquering silence and secrecy is something most children from violent families have to manage.

Relationships play a crucial role in determining outcomes. The child's relationship with their parents contributes significantly to how they are affected by the events they witness. A significant protective factor is social support, particularly a strong and supportive relationship with another adult. This suggests the importance of feeling emotionally secure. Relationships are especially important if several family risk factors are present.

The following chapter examines the long-term consequences of exposure of children to domestic, with the emphasis on the effects of exposure on the women who witnessed it during their childhood's.

## **CHAPTER 6. THE LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES ON ADULT FEMALES OF EXPOSURE TO MARITAL VIOLENCE DURING CHILDHOOD**

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### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

As discussed in previous chapters children exposed to marital violence suffer from post-traumatic symptoms and as well as depression, anxiety, guilt, low self-esteem, self-blame, and acting out. It is possible to infer from this that witnessing spousal abuse during childhood would be associated with problems during adulthood. Nevertheless the long-term effects of witnessing domestic violence have until recently been overlooked (Carlson, 1990; Silvern, Karyl, Waelde, Hodges, Starek, Heidt & Min, 1995).

The vast majority of studies have looked at problems associated with recent witnessing of interparental violence. The long-term psychological consequences of exposure to physical violence between parents has received little attention and the literature examining this area is sparse. Few studies have looked at whether witnessing domestic violence as a child has detrimental effects that persist into adulthood. Research in this area needs to clearly established whether the symptoms associated with exposure to domestic violence seen in the short-term, have a sustained effect on the individual's developmental trajectory (Carlson, 1990;

Edelson, 1999; Forsstrom-Cohen & Rosenbaum, 1985; Henning, et al., 1996; Maker, Kimmelmeier, & Peterson, 1998; Moon, 2000; Silvern, et al., 1995).

Studies have begun to establish that the pervasive effects of living in a climate of violence, and the effects of the trauma of witnessing interparental aggression, disrupts psychosocial development. This is likely to lead to the development of long-term adjustment problems that persist into adulthood. These long-term negative coping responses interfere with the normal development of the individual, ultimately shaping their attitudes, emotions and overall self-concept. How these resulting patterns of adjustment impact upon their adult lives needs to be further investigated (Lehmann, 1997; McCloskey, Figueredo & Koss, 1995).

Retrospective reports suggest that those exposed to wife abuse as children experience greater anxiety, depression, psychological distress, lower self-esteem, trauma symptoms and antisocial behaviour. They experience more violence in their own relationships and have poorer social adjustment. They also suffer from health problems, substance abuse and more aggression (Barnett, Miller-Perrin and Perrin, 1997; Forsstrom-Cohen & Rosenbaum, 1985; Henning, et al., 1996; Maker, Kimmelmeier & Peterson, 1998; McNeal & Amato, 1998; Moon, 2000).

Several studies confirm that males and females are impacted differently by witnessing violence during childhood. These studies show that the effects of exposure appear to be more profound for women than for men during adulthood. Females appear to experience not only different long-term problems, but more of these difficulties. But the effects and impact in females may not be evident until a later point in their development, such as adolescence or adulthood (Cummings, Pepler & Moore, 1999; Forsstrom-Cohen & Rosenbaum, 1985; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997).

## **6.2 PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT**

Studies that have examined the long-term consequences of witnessing marital violence on the psychological and social adjustment of women demonstrate that exposure to domestic violence has a negative long-term impact on a wide range of psychological functions. The findings of several of these studies will be examined in this section.

The study by Forsstrom-Cohen and Rosenbaum (1985) assessed the specific impact that witnessing interparental violence has on psychological and social functioning in adulthood. The results confirm that the negative effects of witnessing parental violence during childhood persist into adulthood. They used two



comparison groups to the witnesses group, one perceived their parents to have been happily married, while the other perceived their parents to have been unhappily married, but nonviolent. Female college students who had been exposed to physical violence between their parents during childhood reported greater symptoms of depression and anxiety than the two comparison groups. These results suggest that witnessing parental violence can have a specific effect on psychological wellbeing over and above being exposed to non-violent parental discord (Henning, et al., 1996).

One of the most significant findings of this study is that males and females are differentially affected. Both males and females showed increased anxiety levels, while females showed more depression and aggression. The increased aggression in female witnesses is in contrast to expectations that males would show more aggression (Forsstrom-Cohen & Rosenbaum, 1985).

Forsstrom-Cohen and Rosenbaum (1985) propose that the increased depression evident in female witnesses is consistent with the learned helplessness model of wife abuse. Girls tend to identify with their mothers, who are victims of violence. Having seen them in such helpless situations can give the message that women are powerless and unable to control their own lives. This message would increase the likelihood of their daughters becoming depressed.

By screening out participants who had been victims of physical child abuse the study clearly demonstrates the effects of witnessing parental violence independently of the confounding effects of having experienced child abuse (Forsstrom-Cohen & Rosenbaum, 1985).

There are certain limitations to this study. It suffers from methodological flaws which limit generalisability as it uses a small sample of predominantly white middle to upper class college students. Interestingly, even in this population, domestic violence occurs in approximately the same percentages as it does in the general population. Despite the presumed advantages of this population group, exposure to violence between their parents is damaging in its effects. Although the study uses retrospective reports from participants about their parent's marital relationship, the authors comment that it is their subjective perception of what took place, that determines the impact of marital conflict (Forsstrom-Cohen & Rosenbaum, 1985).

Henning et al. (1996) looked at the long-term effects of witnessing physically violent conflict between parents. Adult psychological adjustment and social functioning were assessed using two groups, one having witnessed violence and one having not been so exposed. The researchers controlled for variables linked to marital violence, such as child physical abuse and high levels of nonviolent parental conflict. They also

controlled for perceived parental warmth and caring. Differences in the current functioning of the two groups were found. Women who witnessed violence between their parents during childhood reported more psychological symptoms than the non-exposed comparison group. Even when child physical abuse was controlled for, the witness group were found to be more psychologically distressed and showed more social maladjustment than the nonwitness group.

In this study, women whose fathers were the aggressors or where the aggression was mutual were at the most risk for psychological problems. This may be because when males are violent it is more likely to result in injuries and is experienced as more traumatic. The greater psychological distress could be as a result of intense feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness when witnessing father to mother aggression (Henning, et al., 1996).

Controlling for differences in the amount of verbal conflict, and perceived parental warmth and care, did not eliminate significant differences in the psychological and social adjustment of the exposed and non-exposed groups. The witness group still exhibited poorer adjustment, with none of the additional factors accounting for the association between exposure to interparental violence during the childhood and poorer adult adjustment (Henning, et al., 1996).

One of the shortcomings of the Henning et al. (1996) study is that despite controlling for physical abuse and parental verbal conflict the researchers did not assess whether or not sexual abuse or parental substance abuse had taken place. Both of these are potential confounding variables (Maker, Kemmelmeier & Peterson, 1998).

The study by Silvern et al. (1995) investigated the relationship between young adult's accounts of witnessing parental violence and their current levels of depression, self-esteem, and trauma-associated symptoms. Based on retrospective reports of childhood exposure to violence between parents internalising symptoms were found years later among young adults. This provided strong support for a relationship between exposure to parental violence and internalising problems in adulthood.

For males the only significant relationship found was for trauma-related symptoms. For women relationships were found for depression, self-esteem, and trauma-related symptoms. Trauma reactions, for men and women, continued into adulthood. For women depression and low self-esteem indicates that witnessing violence between parents is associated with pervasive feelings of a lack of self-efficacy and self-worth. This

study highlights the covert damage to emotional well being and self-regard in those who have been exposed to spousal abuse as children. The relationship between parental violence, self-esteem and depression remained significant even after controlling for child abuse, parental substance abuse and divorce (Silvern, et al., 1995).

McNeal and Amato (1998) used data from a 12-year longitudinal study, involving interviews with parents and children. Separating out the effects of violent from nonviolent conflict the results confirm that exposure to violence is negatively associated with children's well being, and that witnessing marital violence places children at greater risk of adverse outcomes. This study provides evidence that these consequences persist well into adulthood. It also demonstrates that marital violence predicts child outcomes independently of child physical abuse or substance use. This places children at significant risk for long-term negative outcomes.

Due to the resulting hopelessness and depression, witnessing violence within one's family is a general risk factor for potentially self-destructive behaviours such as suicide. Aggression towards the self may be an outcome of witnessing aggression between others (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Monson, Meyer, Caster & Sanders, 1998).



### **6.2.1 SHAME AND GUILT**

Hoglund and Nicholas (1995) found shame and guilt to be present in children who had experienced emotional abuse during childhood. Emotional abuse of children is common in violent families. As this specifically affects an individual's self-concept it is significantly related to problems in adulthood associated with shame, anger and hostility. The experience of shame is one in which the self feels inferior, unvalued and defective as a person. Added to this are feelings of helplessness and lack of control, which may lead to anger, irritability and resentment. Guilt is related to acts of commission or omission for which the individual feels responsible. Women, for example those, who witnessed domestic violence during childhood, are more likely to experience more of both of these emotions.

### **6.2.2 CO-EXISTING RISK FACTORS**

It is important to be aware of the additional risk factors that commonly accompany spousal abuse. These are physical child abuse and child sexual abuse. It is necessary to assess whether witnessing parental violence

took place independently of child abuse and child sexual abuse. If they did not, the consequences of witnessing wife abuse need to be separated out from the effects of other forms of abuse that occurred during childhood (Silvern, et al., 1995).

Maker, Kemmelmeier and Peterson (1998) examined the long-term consequences of witnessing marital violence within the context of co-existing childhood risk factors. They found that witnesses of marital violence experienced greater levels of sexual and physical abuse. These children also had fathers who were more likely to abused alcohol and drugs. These findings substantiate the existence of co-morbid risk factors in these families. The authors found that the confounding presence of sexual and physical abuse accounted for some of the differences in symptoms reported between groups who had witnessed marital violence and those who had not.

Feerick and Haugaard (1999) studied the long-term effects of witnessing marital violence on the adult functioning of a sample of college women. The authors investigated the impact of exposure to wife abuse on adult victimisation, current levels of adjustment and relationship functioning. This was accomplished while controlling for childhood physical and sexual abuse. Marital violence tended to co-occur with other risk factors such as substance abuse, depression, family mental health problems, as well as childhood physical and sexual abuse.

Their findings support the association between witnessing parental violence during childhood and psychological distress in adulthood. Their most significant result was the association between witnessing marital violence and trauma symptoms. The authors stress the need to examine factors that could account for the effects of witnessing marital violence. They support the notion of cumulative risk, where the combined effects of witnessing marital violence and the presence of other risk factors, are different and more substantial to the effects of witnessing marital violence alone.

Despite their sample representing a relatively well-adjusted group of females, observing marital violence was found to have several long-term effects on functioning, resulting in lower levels of adjustment in adulthood. This is consistent with other findings discussed (Feerick & Haugaard, 1999; Forsstrom-Cohen & Rosenbaum, 1985; Henning, et al., 1996; Silvern, et al., 1995).

### **6.3 SOCIAL IMPACT**

Witnessing marital violence impacts on specific aspects of interpersonal functioning. Children who have been exposed to parental aggression are likely to acquire impaired conflict resolution and communication skills. They may be prone to aggressive and antisocial responses and exhibit diminished social adjustment. They have less perceived social support and a reduced sense of social integration. Their attachment styles also appear to be problematic (Henning, et al., 1996).

In the Feerick and Haugaard (1999) study the long-term effects on social functioning were evident with regard to the women's anxiety in social relationships, their increased social avoidance and their feelings of insecurity in intimate relationships.

#### **6.4 INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT**

The mechanisms through which witnessing interparental violence affects cognitive and emotional functioning during relationship conflict were examined in a study by Duggan, O'Brien and Kennedy (2001). The authors postulate that witnessing violence in childhood affects children's cognitive and emotional functioning. This is found to have an effect on their conflict resolution strategies in adulthood. During continuous exposure to violence, children develop a relational schema and mental model of conflict processes that becomes an enduring one, as it continues to influence their social interactions as adults. These individuals experience more emotional and physiological arousal during intimate partner conflict, as well as more behavioural reactivity. They are also more prone to see aggression in their partner's behaviour, and have an expectation that the conflict is likely to escalate.

The results of this study support the concept of interpersonal scripts being formed during childhood. These become models for expectations and behaviours during conflict situations in adulthood, and the patterns learned during childhood are perpetuated. Individuals who come from childhood's where violent conflict occurred experience more physical and verbal aggression in their own relationships, than those from non-violent backgrounds (Duggan, O'Brien & Kennedy, 2001).

According to O'Keefe (1998) dating violence has been considered the intervening link between exposure to violence in one's family of origin and perpetuating violence in one's family of procreation. Maker, Kemmelmeier and Peterson (1998) found that experiencing violence in dating relationships was uniquely associated with witnessing marital violence. Witnesses of severe violence between their parents were even more likely to be victims or perpetrators of violence in their dating relationships.

## 6.5 PARENTING CONCERNS

A study by Langhinrichsen-Rohling and Dostal (1996) considered how retrospective reports of witnessing violence between parents independently related to concerns about becoming parents. Young adults who had witnessed father-to-mother violence were found to have negative pre-parenthood cognitions. It appears from this study that witnessing abuse between parents increases a child's fears about how they themselves will parent their own children in the future.

Some children who are exposed to violence between parents may not develop sufficient aggression, anger and tension controls. In a study by Miller, Handal, Gilne and Cross (1991) adolescents who had witnessed domestic violence between their parents scored significantly higher on the Child Abuse Potential Inventory than did adolescents without such a history. This study suggests that childhood witnessing of marital violence is a potential risk factor for the physical abuse and maltreatment of the children of those who witnesses violence during their own childhood's.

## 6.6 GENDER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Contemporary theories of gender identity regard gender development as more than just a psychological process. Gender identity is thought to be socially constructed and acquired through social learning. A woman's identity develops predominantly within a relational context, and girls are likely to identify strongly with their mothers. Due to the patriarchal structure of society women are viewed as being of subordinate rank in the social world. Violent families are extremely patriarchal in nature. The family belief system is one where men are believed to be in charge of women. Daughters grow up in a family where women are undermined and undervalued. This takes place through intimidation, aggression and believing that men are entitled to subjugate women (Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg & Walker, 1990).

Femininity for daughters from violent families is problematic and contradictory. It has to be constructed out of extremely contradictory feelings towards their mothers, such as anger and sympathy, contempt and love. This dilemma implies that in order to remain connected to their mothers they have to accept the premises that made her a victim. The mother's primary relationship with an abusive, physically aggressive husband leaves her daughter to experience her as powerless and devalued. The daughter may also feel betrayed by her

mother on a deeper level. Due to her mother's commitment to a violent husband, who undermines women, the daughter herself is unable to feel completely valued by her mother (Goldner, et al., 1990).

Female children are often trapped in an impossible loyalty bind. If they choose loyalty to their mothers they are in effect choosing to accept social and personal suppression. If they choose loyalty to their fathers they are betraying not only their mothers, but also themselves and their feminine identity. The challenge these daughters face is how to connect with and be different from their mothers. This is especially difficult in families that do not easily accommodate female children who have independent strivings and make attempts to be separate and different (Goldner, et al., 1990).

## **6.7 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Witnessing spousal abuse during childhood is associated with problems in adulthood with regard to post-traumatic symptoms, depression, anxiety, guilt, low self-esteem, self-blame, and externalised behavioural problems. The trauma and disruptive effects of witnessing interparental violence has been shown to result in long-term psychological adjustment problems that are enduring enough to affect their adult lives. These negative responses interfere with the normal functioning of these women, shaping and influencing their attitudes, emotions and sense of self. What is evident from many studies is that the consequences of witnessing violence may not be evident until adolescence or adulthood.

It is apparent that research on the long-term consequences of exposure to domestic violence for females has been neglected. There are few studies on this specific area of interest and particularly few recent studies. Furthermore, the research that has been conducted has been approached primarily from a quantitative perspective, which may fail to capture the nuances, subtleties and complexities of this experience for women. A quantitative approach may not do justice to the experience of these witnesses, resulting in them becoming even more invisible. While their experiences remain with them throughout their lives, this aspect of their selfhood is hidden from view. The voices of these women, who are now in adulthood, are still silent and their stories remain untold. What has been determined is that there is great impact on their lives, but how this patterns their own intimate relationships, their parenting roles and the other facets of their lives, is still uncertain.

The main emphasis in research appears to be on the negative outcomes of their experiences. This does not take into account their meaning making or their resilience. These are areas that need to be explored more deeply in order to capture their authentic experiences, and have these expressed in their own words.

## **CHAPTER 7. EVALUATION OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON EXPOSURE TO MARITAL VIOLENCE**

### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

A wide range of methodological criticisms have been levelled at the existing research on child witnessing of domestic violence (Carlson, 1996). This section looks at the methodological shortcomings of research on the effects of exposure to marital violence. The final section of this chapter will discuss directions for future research that may address some of these problems.

Despite recognising the damage that witnessing marital violence has on children little is known about: (a) the unique effects of observing marital violence; (b) the nature and severity of the effects on the children involved; and, (c) the variables that directly influence these effects (Fantuzzo & Lindquist, 1989; Fantuzzo, et al., 1991).

Another problem in the interpretation of the research on children exposed to family violence is the difficulty in being able to distinguish between general predictors of child psychopathology, and those that are specifically associated with the impact of domestic violence on children (Moore, et al., 1989).

In this section the shortcomings of current research on the effects of witnessing domestic violence in children will be examined, highlighted and alternative methods discussed.

### **7.2 THE USE OF CONTROL AND COMPARISON GROUPS**

Few studies take into account the effects of child neglect, child sexual abuse and child physical abuse, which tend to overlap considerably with domestic violence. This increases the chances of confounding the effects of being abused as a child, with being exposed to spousal violence (Fantuzzo & Lindquist, 1989; Fantuzzo, et al., 1991; Mullender & Morley, 1994).



Only approximately half of the studies reviewed included control groups for comparison purposes. Of those that did, the comparison groups from non-violent families had not been matched on socioeconomic, family composition, and ethnic variables, nor on the extent of family discord experienced. Not including control and comparison groups compromises the validity of the data obtained (Fantuzzo & Lindquist, 1989; Fantuzzo, et al., 1991).

### 7.3 SOURCES OF DATA

The source of the information on witnessing domestic violence is important in order to gain a comprehensive and accurate picture of children's adjustment. Furthermore, levels of agreement between different sources is found to be extremely low (Sternberg, et al., 1993).

In their review of the research Fantuzzo and Lindquist (1989) found that in the majority of their studies the victim of the violence, in other words, the child's mother, was the sole source of the information in the report. The over-reliance on maternal ratings and reports of their children's behaviours might compromise the internal validity of existing research.

Reports given by children's mothers may be affected by many confounding variables. For example there are potential accuracy problems with maternal reports under crisis conditions, such as during shelter residence. Mothers may also underreport or minimise the violence that their children have witnessed because of feelings of shame and embarrassment. They may be wary that their responses may affect the help they receive, and they may fear that if they reveal everything that has taken place in their homes they will be reported to Child Protection Services and risk having their children removed (Fantuzzo, Mohr & Noone, 2000; Huth-Bocks, Levendosky & Semel, 2001).

Mothers may not provide an accurate indication of their own children's behaviour. Information on the child's negative behaviours may be amplified because, for example, a mother may justify using harsh punishment on her child by exaggerating their problematic behaviours (Jouriles, Barling & O'Leary, 1987).

Using predominantly maternal reports is a limitation that must be considered. Gathering information from multiple sources is critical. Additional sources of information, from teachers and other significant people in their lives, helps to give a more complete picture of the child's behaviour. It is also important to listen to the children themselves. Information from the perpetrators of the abuse would also be useful. As each informant's perspective is valuable, reliance on any one source limits the accuracy of what is known about the child's functioning (Jaffe, et al., 1986; Levendovsky & Graham-Bermann, 2000; Sternberg, et al., 1993).

Telephone surveys, used for data in many studies, suffer from similar shortcomings. Problems associated with information gathered via telephone surveys include inaccurate reporting on the extent of domestic violence. This may be due to issues of mistrust, privacy and confidentiality. The accuracy of the information is also more difficult to assess and correct via a telephone interview (Fantuzzo, Mohr & Noone, 2000).

Several studies suffer from limitations associated with retrospective reports. It is possible that some participants will not recall events that took place. There is also the likelihood that what is recalled will be distorted. Those who are currently experiencing psychological problems may be more likely to remember the more negative aspects of their family experiences, which influences the type of information they remember (Henning, et al., 1996).

#### **7.4 SHELTER POPULATIONS**

As Carlson (1996) mentions most of the information on children exposed to domestic violence is obtained from mothers staying in domestic violence shelters. The over-reliance on shelter samples can be a threat to the study's external validity for reasons that will be discussed below.

It is unknown how representative of the entire population of battered women, or exposed children, shelter samples are. These samples may be considered biased and not generalisable as they represent a small, and possibly unrepresentative percentage of exposed children. Shelter samples are self selected on many dimensions that cannot be controlled or often even identified (Fantuzzo et al., 1991, Fantuzzo, Mohr & Noone, 2000; Mullender & Morley, 1994; Spaccarelli, Sandler & Roosa, 1994).

Shelters are places of temporary residence, which are geared towards crisis management. They are stressful in their own right, which could impact children's psychological well being. In a shelter the assessment of a child's functioning is provided under circumstances that may undermine the validity of the information obtained. Children's psychological functioning could be related to factors particular to the unique setting of the shelter. It is not certain therefore, whether the results can be attributed to the violence alone, to the shelter stresses, or to a combination of both (Fantuzzo, Mohr & Noone, 2000; Moore, et al., 1989).

Shelter residence has been found to make an independent contribution to externalising and internalising behaviour problems, as well as social competence problems in children, when other variables are controlled for. A study by Fantuzzo et al. (1991) found that children living in shelters showed significantly higher levels of psychological distress than a carefully matched sample of children who were exposed to the same level and type of domestic violence, but who were still living at home.

Shelter families experience several adversities that may not be experienced by comparison groups. In addition to the violence experienced these families have many additional difficulties which may confound the results. Not only are they assessed at a time of acute crisis, but they may be experiencing financial problems, the stress of having to move and being separated from their partners and fathers respectively. The mothers are particularly stressed and the children are in unfamiliar surroundings, away from familiar possessions and people. Children's behaviour could be related to their contexts as they could be reacting to the situation itself. These factors may contaminate the instruments intended to measure the impact of observing interparental violence (Carlson, 1996; Huth-Bocks, Levendovsky & Semel, 2001).

The majority of shelter residents are of lower socioeconomic status. It is uncertain whether witnessing domestic violence has the same impact on those whose circumstances are less adverse. Many women who are victims of domestic violence do not stay in shelters. Shelter children are therefore not representative of all children who witness domestic violence. Children in shelters are likely to have witnessed the most severe and ongoing violence and have experienced many associated stressors (Carlson, 1996; Mullender & Morley, 1994).



## **7.5 MEASUREMENT PROBLEMS**

Violence in families is extremely difficult to measure. Many measurement problems are concerned with the definitions of witnessing marital violence. The problems encountered in measuring this phenomenon reflect the complexity of what children have been exposed to when they witness violence between their parents (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

Fantuzzo and Lindquist (1989) found that in most of studies reviewed the main parameters of the violence that children were exposed to were not described. This relates to the frequency, type and extent of the violence, the recency of the last episode, and what was directly observed by the child. Children may be exposed to a wide variety of verbal and physical abuse of their mothers. Their exposure ranges from being in the same room, to hearing the violence, to witnessing the effects, to living with the aftermath and living in an atmosphere of intimidation. Children may also have observed a range of violent acts over various time periods. Many of these ways of witnessing violence are not accessed in the measurement instruments utilised.

Many studies are limited by the use of single items to measure the witnessing of violence. This may not capture the range of aggressive and violent incidents to which participants might have been exposed (Feerick & Haugaard, 1999).

In their review of the research Fantuzzo and Lindquist (1989) found that in only approximately one third of the studies reviewed was a standardised instrument such as the Conflicts Tactics Scale used. The remaining studies used less rigorous methods to determine the nature and extent of the violence, such as non-standardised questionnaires and clinical impressions.

### **7.5.1 THE CHILD BEHAVIOUR CHECKLIST (CBLC)**

Many researchers have utilised measurements that assess child and parent reports of behaviours. One of the main instruments used is the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL). This is a 120 item instrument that measures the child's behaviour over three broad areas where problems are likely to occur. These are: internalising behaviours, externalising behaviours and social competency. Subcategories included are cognitive and physical functioning (Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002).

Although these scales are believed to be well conceptualised (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990) this instrument is a measure of the general functioning in children. It was not developed to assess the unique impacts of exposure to domestic violence. A more sensitive measure to the impact of witnessing domestic violence would be more useful (Edelson, 1999).

Jaffe, Wolfe and Wilson (1990) recommend that the CBLC is complemented by directly interviewing the children involved and including observations by other significant adults in their lives. These authors comment that although the CBLC provides a valuable overview of children's adjustment problems, it does not replace the rich information that is available directly from children, using a more qualitative approach.

### **7.5.2 THE CONFLICTS TACTICS SCALE (CTS)**

One of the more popular measures of domestic violence and the witnessing of domestic violence is the Conflicts Tactics Scale. This is a self-report instrument that measures the way disagreements are managed, including any incidents of violence and the frequency with which these acts have occurred during the relationship (Brewster, 2002; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

This scale contains eighteen items representing three different types of tactics used to resolve conflict. These are, reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence (Straus, 1979; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, 1996).

The scale has been criticised for its inability to accurately measure intimate partner violence. It oversimplifies patterns of violent behaviour, takes acts of violence out of context, and does not take into

account the meaning behind the violence, to the perpetrator or to the victim. There is no acknowledgement of motives, consequences, outcomes, injury, coercion, self-defence or the fear that is felt (Carr & van Deusen, 2002; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

Another problem with the CTS's ability to identify violent incidents is that there is no clear link between the intention of a violent act and the actual outcome. Less severe acts of violence may cause serious injury, for example a push at the top of a flight of stairs. While more extreme acts of violence, such as firing a gun that misses the intended victim, may not result in any physical injuries (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

In defense of these criticisms Straus et al. (1996) state that the CTS is intended to be used in conjunction with other measures that would assist in determining the causes, context or consequences relevant to any particular study or situation. In order to address some of these limitations the revised CTS now includes a separate scale to measure physical injury.

## **7.6 LONGITUDINAL AND OUTCOME STUDIES**

Too few longitudinal and follow-up studies have been undertaken in this area of research. Longitudinal studies are essential, as without them there is no way of distinguishing between the reactive and immediate effects of witnessing domestic violence and the long-term consequences of exposure to violence between parents. As children grow and develop the long-term sequelae may take very different forms, as a result of normative developmental stages. Short-term research is unable to track changes in these consequences over time (Fantuzzo & Lindquist, 1989; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

## **7.7 CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Fantuzzo and Lindquist (1989) make the following recommendations for further research: The need for the accurate operationalisation of both "violence" and "witnessing"; the need for a detailed description of the violence witnessed, including the type of violence, its frequency, recency, antecedents and consequences; and, details about the type of exposure with regard to what was observed and heard and if and how the child intervened.

Fantuzzo et al. (1997) criticise the tendency of traditional research to use an exclusively problem oriented approach when studying high risk behaviour such as domestic violence. In so doing these studies remain uninformed about the complexities of the lives of these families, and fail to see their many strengths. These authors reiterate that many more families are "making it" than "not making it". Traditional research methods

tend to track failure, risk and vulnerability, rather than seeking out people's successes, their potential and their resilience.

Mullender et al. (2002) draw attention to the lack of studies in the field of domestic violence research that actually make the children's own perspectives and experiences the focus of the research. The actual words and experiences of the children involved are rarely used.

## **7.8 RESEARCH USING QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY**

Attempts to quantify the impact of domestic violence on child witnesses do not recognise the uniqueness of the individual child's response to the violence. This approach does not appreciate the complexity of the lived experiences of witnessing these traumatic events (McGee, 2000; Mullender, et al., 2002; Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

Quantitative research cannot capture the richness of the individual's experience. This is particularly so when using standardised items. For example, if two individuals have identical scores on a particular item, their subjective experience can still differ considerably. Standardised scales do not take into account this subjectivity, nor the contextual dimension, ignoring personal meanings of domestic violence. Personal feelings such as pain and fear are not captured, yet are integral to the experience of violence (Murphy & O'Leary, 1994).

Qualitative methods, providing rich and detailed data, facilitate the process of gathering information in the women and children's own words, paying particular attention to the subjective meaning of their experiences, creating space for in-depth and personal knowledge, allowing multiple perspectives to be accessed. These methods are able to access woman's own perspectives, in their own words, of the impact of witnessing violence during their childhood's (Mullender, et al., 2002; Murphy & O'Leary, 1994; Riger, Raja & Camacho, 2002; Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

The need for high quality research on the invisible and extremely vulnerable victims of domestic violence has never been more acute. Because the negative effects of witnessing parental violence persist into adulthood, it is important that interventions are designed not only for children who have recently witnessed violence, but for adults who were psychologically harmed as children, as a result of such exposure (Fantuzzo, et al., 1997; Henning, et al., 1996).

## **CHAPTER 8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

## **8.1 INTRODUCTION**

The image of the family that is most valued by society is one in which there is happiness, peace, love and tranquillity. Above all else there is a sense of safety, protection and security. Another side to the family has been described in this mini-dissertation. It has shown that a family can be a very dangerous and harmful place within which to live and grow up (Angless & Shefer, 1997; Gelles, 1997).

Having been exposed to violence within their family children suffer considerable harm and loss. They may have lost people to talk to, their quality of life, their chance to be part of a loving family, and their ability to feel free and secure within their own homes. There are many other less tangible losses that accompany this. The lost opportunity to be who they might have been and the loss of their own personal identity. These individuals, as children, or as adults, need to find a way to understand what has taken place in their lives, find the opportunity to heal, and in so doing to regain and restore their personal meanings and sense of wholeness (Lehmann & Rabenstein, 2002; Mullender & Morley, 1994).

In order to meaningfully address this problem it is important to have a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of witnessing domestic violence by children and to grasp how extensive the problems are that are encountered as a result of this exposure. It is also necessary to examine the multitude of factors that influence the outcomes evident, in order to gain a greater understanding of the complexity of the problem and to provide effective interventions.

## **8.2 AIMS OF THE MINI-DISSERTATION**

The primary aim of this study was to present the ways in which children are affected by witnessing their father assaulting their mother. Although children are described as hidden victims (Fantuzzo, Mohr, & Noone, 2000) it is clear from what has been presented that they are seriously affected (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999). There is a great likelihood that this experience will impact upon the rest of their lives, shaping their adulthood, their intimate relationships and the type of relationships they are likely to have with their children. In painting a picture of these effects, it is hoped that these victims will be more visible and better understood (Feerick & Haugaard, 1999).



This study has described the wide-range of problems that are associated with children exposed to violence between their parents. Significant behavioural, emotional and cognitive problems are evident among these children and it appears as if most domains of functioning are negatively affected (Edelson, 1999). The literature reviewed has shown that witnessing violence impacts upon their development in many different ways. The outcomes and consequences depend on the combinations and interactions of several different factors. Although some children are more resilient than others, it is clear that all exposed children experience difficulties that emerge in different ways, but are likely to impact upon their futures (Pepler, Catallo & Moore, 2000).

What is clear from this literature review is that children respond to witnessing domestic violence in a variety of ways (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999). These responses are mediated by many factors, for example, the age and sex of the child, the intensity and frequency of the violence, parental responses, levels of family dysfunction, the quality and type of intervention, and the psychological disposition of the child (Cummings, Pepler & Moore, 1999). Witnessing violence is not a singular experience and children's experiences vary according to many different characteristics. The results of the literature review therefore cannot provide generalisations, a uniform profile, or a typical outcome.

This study also examined various theoretical perspectives on exposure to domestic violence. As discussed in this paper, they provide an important framework that contributes to the understanding of this phenomena (Mohr & Fantuzzo, 2000). While the theories are different from one another, and there is yet to be one comprehensive and integrated theory on this topic, these perspectives are all informative and useful in many ways. A fundamental difficulty in formulating an explanatory framework for child witnesses of domestic violence is the interrelatedness of cause and effect (Rossman, Hughes & Rosenberg, 1999).

What this literature review has shown is that there are many shortcomings in this area research. What appears to be lacking is an in-depth understanding of the phenomena of witnessing marital violence during childhood. The meanings that these children have attached to their experiences are not accessed in the research. Nor do these studies look at exposure from the perspective of the child. In utilising a narrow focus the studies fail to capture a more accurate and in depth understanding of the effects and meanings of this experience for the individuals who have been affected (Riger, Raja & Camacho, 2002).



There are few studies undertaken that try to understand these children's experiences from their own perspectives or that try to access the meanings that are attached (Murphy, & O'Leary, 1994). Most approaches do not access the texture and intricacies that are contained within their experiences. The majority of existing research on wife abuse have excluded the effects on children who have witnessed such events (Mullender & Morley, 1994; Mullender, et al., 2002).

Other shortcomings encountered in the research were the lack of studies that examined the long-term consequences of exposure to marital violence, and the specific ways in which these children's lives are altered as adults (Carlson, 1996; Fantuzzo et al., 1991). There is very little research on how exposure to violence affects intimacy in relationships, femininity in women and their own experiences of motherhood. These studies have not accessed the stories of women who took their silence into adulthood, nor looked at what this cost them (Maker, et al., 1998; Moon 2000; Silvern, et al., 1995).

For these women the violence that has taken place between their parents has often remained a secret, and been hidden from the world. Creating space for dialogue about what took place and how they were affected takes away the secret's power. Such dialogues are valuable because having grown up in such environments women may feel that their explanations and meanings have deserted them, resulting in shame and confusion (Goldner, et al., 1990).

In few studies did the researchers accounted for themselves or their influence in contributing to the outcomes. Researcher neutrality has been assumed (Murphy, & O'Leary, 1994). This does not take into account any of the power dynamics taking place between the researcher and the participants, particularly if they are children. This could result in the objectification of these children as research subjects. In addition most of the information obtained in the literature appears in reduced and fragmented form, rather than providing a whole and integrated understanding of this phenomenon.

In the light of what has been discussed, it is clear that research on the witnessing of domestic violence by children is necessary if not urgent. Nevertheless the amount of research on wife abuse and the effects on exposed children that has been done in South Africa is limited and extremely insufficient. While many aspects of the experience of exposure are universal for children, it is clear that South African children experience violence in very different ways from children in other countries. Due to the history of apartheid, the racial and gender structures in this country and the endemic nature of violence against women, exposure

to violence in South Africa has many unique aspects that need to be specifically researched and applied to this unique context (Angless & Shefer, 1997; McKendrick & Hoffman, 1990; Segal & Labe, 1990).

### 8.3 CONCLUSION

Witnessing wife battering is one of the most pervasive social problems, but one that has long been hidden from public and professional attention (Fantuzzo, Mohr, & Noone, 2000). The effects on the child witnesses should not be underestimated. Witnessing battering qualitatively changes the development of the child, and the type of intimate relationships they are likely to experience. More tragically it changes their relationship to themselves in profound and often damaging and negative ways. The implications for these individuals, of having experienced this during childhood, are far reaching.

Although many children find ways to cope that help to reduce the impact of exposure, the severity of the consequences experienced by exposed children should not be minimised. These may manifest in different ways but will impact on their futures if they are not acknowledged and attended to. Enhancing children's ability to survive and make sense of their experience is a challenge facing all involved in this field, but in order to protect children more completely, there is no alternative but for wife abuse and violence to cease.

Studies on the effects of domestic violence on children exposed to it will hopefully pave the way for more accurate and adequate interventions regardless of the stage of life the witnesses find themselves in (Henning, et al., 1996). It is hoped that this study would contribute towards the protection of the lives and welfare of these childhood victims.

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