

Witnessing Domestic Violence: A Case Study of Effects on the Child in the Short Film “Samskara”

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Abstract

Domestic violence is an ongoing experience of physical, psychological, or sexual abuse in the home that is used to establish power and control over another person. Most of the medical literature has focused on the effects of domestic violence on the primary victims. What effect does witnessing domestic violence have on secondary victims, such as children who live in homes where the partners abuse others? This paper will examine how domestic violence leads children to develop age-dependent adverse effects. It will focus on the cognitive, behavioural, and emotional impact of domestic violence. It will analyse through the lens of affect theory how the abused child Abhimanyu adopts the personality and traits of his abusive father in his adolescence, which turns him into the same culprit for his wife.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Children Abuse, Family Relationships, Affect Theory, Trauma

Introduction

Domestic violence, encompassing violence or conflict within familial settings such as marriages, cohabitation, or intimate relationships, is a significant issue affecting women in India. Data from the National Family Health Survey conducted between 2016 to 2022 reveals a concerning trend. In 2016-2019, 29.3% of married Indian women aged 18-49 reported experiencing domestic or sexual violence. This figure increased to 31.2% from 2019 to 2021, with 22% of complaints related to crimes against women within their households.

Despite these reported cases, there remains a substantial knowledge gap regarding the interpretation and impact of domestic violence, particularly concerning children in such environments. Limited research exists on how domestic violence affects children within families and how they cope with such traumatic experiences. Typically, the focus is predominantly on the adults involved, overshadowing the profound effects on children.

This paper aims to address this gap by shedding light on the extent of the impact of domestic violence on children. It explores how children are affected emotionally and psychologically when exposed to such violence during their formative years and how these experiences manifest in their behavior during adolescence.

Studies consistently indicate that children exposed to domestic violence are vulnerable to both emotional and physical harm. They may suffer physical injuries when attempting to intervene in violent encounters between adults. Moreover, recent research emphasizes the emotional toll on children, highlighting instances of mental abuse and trauma resulting from witnessing violence among family members. The

effects of domestic violence on children often mirror those of other forms of child abuse, including physical, emotional, and cyberbullying.

The present study underscores the urgent need to address the pervasive issue of domestic violence and its detrimental effects on children analysing a Hindu short film “Samskara”. By understanding the nuanced ways in which children experience and internalize such trauma, policymakers and stakeholders can develop more comprehensive interventions to protect and support vulnerable children in domestic violence situations.

Definition of Domestic Violence and Children

Domestic violence refers to any form of gender-based violence perpetrated against women, resulting in, or having the potential to cause, physical, sexual, or emotional harm or suffering. This includes acts such as threats, coercion, or unjustified deprivation of freedom, occurring within both public and private spheres. The roots of Domestic Violence (DV) can be traced back to the concept of patriarchy, as outlined by Friedrich Engels in his seminal work "The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State." Engels posits that the evolution of agriculture necessitated private land ownership, emphasizing the significance of inheritance in societies. Consequently, women came to be regarded as property, primarily tasked with bearing children and preserving family lineage. This control wielded by men over women served as a mechanism to maintain patriarchal authority, resulting in male dominance within the household. Any perceived challenge to this dominance often precipitates incidents of domestic violence.

Domestic violence (DV) is recognized as a significant global health issue and has garnered the attention of policymakers in both social and health sectors (Finley, 2019; Marchetti, 2019; Shayan et al., 2015). Family violence has far-reaching consequences, impacting the physical and psychological well-being of all household members, including relatives (Ferrari et al., 2016; Noble-Carr et al., 2019). DV encompasses various forms of violence, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, predominantly occurring within intimate partner relationships. However, it can also extend to child, elderly, or sibling abuse (Kourti et al., 2023). DV poses a significant health risk to children globally and is a matter of concern for public health authorities.

According to reports from UNICEF, approximately 133–275 million children worldwide are exposed to or witness domestic violence (Unicef, 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the significance of domestic violence as a critical public health issue (Wake and Kandula, 2022). Repeated exposure to domestic violence is associated with the onset, severity, and recurrence of mental health problems (Jouriles et al., 2018; Münger and Markström, 2018; Zarenezhad et al., 2016), and individuals with pre-existing mental disorders are at a higher risk of experiencing complications related to domestic violence (Khalifeh and Dean, 2010; Vaziri et al., 2018).

Domestic violence poses a threat to the health and quality of life of family members, particularly children (Hester et al., 2015; Ferrari et al., 2016; Knight and Hester, 2016; Carneiro et al., 2017; Jaffe et al., 2017; David and Jaffe, 2018). It is often characterized by emotional rather than physical manifestations (Callaghan et al., 2017; Ali and McGarry, 2020). Children, being integral members of families and society, are indirect victims of domestic violence and may suffer severe and irreversible physical and mental impacts as a result (Ferrari et al., 2016; Gomma et al., 2019; Hall, 2019). However, the psychological effects of domestic violence on children have not been systematically explored.

Thus, the present paper aims to comprehensively examine and demonstrate the psychological impacts of domestic violence on children, shedding light on the nuanced ways in which children are affected by exposure to domestic violence.

Conceptualization Domestic Violence in Relation to Children

The family, traditionally perceived as a bastion of love and support, carries a complex dynamic within our society. It serves as both a locus of social control and a pillar of social support, harboring within its internal workings the potential for both positive and negative relational impacts.

While discussions surrounding domestic violence often center on the plight of women or wives as primary victims, the reality is that its ramifications extend to all family members, particularly children. However, the attention and assistance provided to children in the aftermath of such incidents often lag behind that offered to women, and the effects of these events on children are frequently underexplored. Children, crucial for the nation's development, are profoundly impacted by domestic violence, finding themselves thrust into a distressing environment fraught with anxiety, anger, and fear. Consequently, children are just as susceptible to the deleterious effects of domestic violence as their mothers.

Exposure to domestic violence during childhood has been unequivocally linked to a spectrum of adverse outcomes, encompassing diminished self-esteem, social withdrawal, depression, anxiety, and a propensity towards aggression, violence, and delinquency. The impact on children's cognitive, behavioral, and emotional well-being can manifest in both short-term upheavals and long-term repercussions. However, it is essential to acknowledge that each child's response to trauma is unique, with some demonstrating resilience and exhibiting minimal negative effects. Factors influencing children's responses to witnessing domestic abuse are multifaceted, encompassing variables such as age, race, gender, and developmental stage.

Domestic violence manifests in diverse ways and has been categorized by some scholars as encompassing both direct and indirect forms. Indirect abuse may stem from inter-parental violence, where children themselves are not the direct targets of abuse. Nonetheless, children who witness inter-parental violence, even if they do not directly observe it but only hear it, can still be profoundly affected: "While often labeled as mere witnesses to inter-parental violence, implying a passive role, children actively interpret, attempt to predict, and assess their roles in causing the violence" (Baker and Cunningham, 2009).

Indeed, the distinction between direct and indirect abuse has been criticized as potentially oversimplified and misleading. Callaghan et al. (2018) argue that it is overly restrictive to view domestic violence solely as abuse between intimate partners in a dyadic relationship, with children perceived merely as being "affected by" the abuse: "Far from being passive observers, they are not merely 'exposed' to violence and abuse; instead, they live with it and directly experience it, just as adults do."

Considering children solely as "affected by" domestic violence downplays the profound impact it has on them. Instead, Callaghan et al. (2018) advocate for recognizing children as direct victims of violence and abuse. This shift in perspective could lead to more effective professional responses tailored to meet the unique needs of children affected by domestic violence.

Domestic violence can impact individuals across all age groups. Sterne and Poole (2010) emphasize that the duration of children's exposure to domestic abuse has a more significant influence on their stress levels than the severity of the abuse itself. The harm resulting from domestic violence can manifest in various forms, including physical, emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and social effects. Often, these effects overlap and are interconnected.

This paper focuses on the psychological challenges encountered by children exposed to domestic violence and examines how these experiences can evolve into long-term disorders.

Research on Psychological Consequences of Domestic Violence on Children

While domestic violence may not directly involve children, its repercussions can profoundly affect them. Children may perceive that their parents are indifferent to their emotions, leading to a deterioration in family relationships. If such instances persist, it can significantly undermine family cohesion, as children may become desensitized to the domestic violence they witness and disengage from nurturing family bonds (Thornton, 2014).

Conversely, children who are unable to overlook domestic violence and grapple with confusion may resort to mimicking violent behavior as a means to garner attention from their parents (Thornton, 2014). They may rationalize that if their parents engage in such conduct, they can do so as well.

Numerous studies have consistently highlighted the detrimental effects of domestic violence on children's psychological well-being and behavior. Levendofsky and Bermann (2001) conducted a study involving 120 women and their children residing either in the community or domestic violence shelters. Their findings underscored an ecological model delineating the impact of domestic violence on children, further elucidating the ecological framework and trauma theory to explore its effects.

Huth-Bocks et al. (2001) examined the direct and indirect effects of domestic violence on the intellectual functioning of young children. Their study, which included 100 women and their 3–5-year-old children, revealed significant impacts on verbal and visual-spatial abilities, attributed to maternal depression and the quality of the home environment.

In another investigation by Levendofsky et al. (2002), trauma symptoms in 62 preschool-age children exposed to domestic violence were evaluated. The findings indicated a correlation between exposure to domestic violence and increased aggressive behaviors and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Children who witness domestic violence are also prone to behavioral problems. Spilsbury et al. (2008) studied 1019 children exposed to domestic violence and observed symptoms of psychological maladjustment, including externalizing and internalizing problems. Similarly, Torteya et al. (2009) reported that exposure to domestic violence was associated with higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problems, particularly in cases of chronic exposure.

Fusco and Fantuzzo (2009) examined the effects of direct exposure to and involvement in domestic violence on children. Their findings revealed that a significant portion of children exposed to domestic violence were directly involved in the violent incidents, both physically and mentally.

Rigterink et al. (2010) investigated the impact of domestic violence on children's emotion regulation by measuring vagal tone (VT). They observed that while all children exhibited increased VT baseline, those exposed to domestic violence showed less pronounced increases compared to non-exposed children. This suggests that exposure to domestic violence may sensitize children to stress, leading to heightened physiological responses and depletion of their coping resources, as evidenced by lower baseline VT levels.

Fortin et al. (2011) conducted a study involving 79 children exposed to domestic violence (DV), focusing on indicators such as attribution of blame and perceived threat to assess children's appraisals of violence. They also evaluated levels of parentification and conflicts related to children's perceptions of family relationships. Their findings highlighted the impact of these variables and revealed associations between

self-blame and children's parentification, which could affect various dimensions of children's psychological well-being.

Other studies have similarly documented the detrimental effects of DV on children's emotional and psychological health. Thornton (2014) observed negative and overwhelming emotions, along with a suppression effect, particularly among young children. Additionally, reduced psychological well-being and satisfaction with social support were reported (2017). Dargis and Koenigs (2017) identified interpersonal and affective features of psychopathy, as well as potential psychopathic behaviors, in children exposed to DV.

Subsequent research by Cho (2018) reported aggressive behavior, depression, anxiety, and juvenile delinquency among children who witnessed DV. Forke et al. (2018) found higher perpetration rates among boys and higher combined victimization/perpetration rates among girls, indicating significant psychological adverse effects. These psychological problems can alter behavioral development and diminish life satisfaction.

Paul (2019) documented post-traumatic stress symptoms in children witnessing DV, while Hussain et al. (2019) reported mental depression, humiliation, and negative effects on cognitive growth. Cho (2019) noted depression, anxiety, delinquent behavior, academic performance issues, and social challenges among South Korean children exposed to DV. Conversely, Fogarty et al. (2020) detected emotional-behavioral resilience in some children exposed to DV.

The mental and psychological consequences mentioned above may have long-lasting effects, impacting children's personal, social, and educational performance, as well as their overall quality of life. These findings underscore the urgent need for intervention and support to mitigate the adverse effects of DV on children's well-being and development.

Effects of Witnessing Domestic Violence as a Child

New research suggests that witnessing violence between parents during childhood can have long-lasting effects on mental health, potentially increasing the risk of depression and other psychological issues. A study conducted on Canadian adults aimed to explore this hypothesis, drawing from data collected in a national survey on mental health. The study encompassed over 17,700 participants, among whom 326 reported experiencing parental domestic violence more than 10 times before the age of 16, categorizing this exposure as chronic.

The findings revealed significant disparities in mental health outcomes between those exposed to chronic parental domestic violence during childhood and those with no history of such violence. Among individuals who experienced chronic exposure to parental domestic violence, 22.5% reported experiencing major depression at some point in their lives, 15% reported an anxiety disorder, and nearly 27% reported a substance abuse disorder. In comparison, those with no history of parental violence had lower rates of major depression (9%), anxiety disorders (7%), and substance abuse disorders (19%).

Deirdre Ryan-Morrisette, a recent graduate in social work from the university's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and co-author of the study, highlighted the persistent impact of childhood exposure to parental domestic violence on mental health. She noted that many children exposed to such violence often develop a heightened sense of vigilance and anxiety, fearing that any conflict may escalate into physical assault. This perpetual state of apprehension can contribute to elevated rates of anxiety disorders in adulthood among those with a history of parental domestic violence.

The effects of domestic abuse on children can manifest both in the short term and in the long run. Immediate impacts often include heightened anxiety, especially if the child is constantly exposed to one parent's abuse by the other. Living in a state of fear and anticipation of further violence can create a pervasive sense of anxiety in children. For preschoolers, witnessing abuse may lead to regressive behaviors such as thumb sucking, bedwetting, increased crying, and whining. School-aged children may develop antisocial traits and experience guilt over the abuse they witness, which can significantly affect their self-esteem.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is one of the most devastating effects of domestic violence on children. Even if they are not physically abused themselves, the trauma of witnessing domestic violence can cause significant changes in their developing brains. Symptoms of PTSD may include nightmares, changes in sleep patterns, anger, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and the tendency to re-enact aspects of the abusive behavior they witnessed.

There can also be physical manifestations of mental health strains, particularly in school-aged children who may report headaches and stomach pains attributable to the tense environment at home. Infants, in particular, are at a higher risk of physical injury due to the constant exposure to abuse directed at a parent. Teenagers who witness domestic abuse may exhibit aggressive behavior, engaging in fights, skipping school, risky sexual activities, substance abuse, and involvement in criminal activities.

Furthermore, children living in abusive households are at risk of becoming victims of physical abuse themselves. An abusive partner can easily transition into an abusive parent or guardian, perpetuating a cycle of harm that affects the entire family.

In the long term, children who witness domestic violence are likely to carry the effects well into adulthood. For many, this may manifest as depression, stemming from the chronic exposure to a toxic and abusive environment. The trauma of witnessing domestic violence increases the risk of developing symptoms such as sadness, concentration issues, and other signs of depression throughout adulthood.

Additionally, there may be health problems in adulthood that can be directly linked to the physical, emotional, and verbal abuse witnessed during childhood. Conditions such as heart disease, obesity, and diabetes may have roots in the traumatic experiences of domestic violence.

Moreover, there is a risk that children who grow up witnessing domestic violence may perpetuate abusive patterns in their own relationships as adults. This can create a cycle of violence that continues across generations, with male children potentially becoming abusers themselves and female children at a higher risk of experiencing abuse in their adult relationships. It's crucial to recognize that abuse does not always occur in predictable cycles, and assumptions about cyclical patterns can lead to victim-blaming. Ultimately, early exposure to abuse can significantly shape the trajectory of children's lives and their relationships in adulthood.

“Samskara”

The Hindi short film titled "Samskara," meaning 'Impression,' delves into the profound impact of domestic violence on individuals across generations. In psychology, an impression refers to the subconscious process of forming opinions about people or the environment. Impression formation occurs as individuals perceive others based on various characteristics observed during initial interactions. These impressions play a crucial role in shaping perceptions and behavior.

Directed by debut director Sankalp Rawal and produced by Six Sigma Films, "Samskara" features Namit Das and Naman Jain in lead roles and explores domestic violence through a suspense-thriller lens. The

film skillfully intertwines the past and present, portraying the cyclical nature of abuse and its lasting effects on individuals' lives.

Through a captivating use of the 'split screen' technique, the film juxtaposes the protagonist's childhood trauma with his adult struggles. On one side, we witness a young boy (Naman Jain) comforting his mother after fatally shooting his abusive father, while on the other side, his grown-up counterpart (Namit Das) grapples with his own violent tendencies towards his wife. The film poignantly illustrates how the protagonist, Abhimanyu, internalizes his father's abusive behavior, perpetuating the cycle of violence in his adulthood.

The narrative unfolds with meticulous attention to detail, with each sequence meticulously crafted to mirror its counterpart. Every gesture and action resonate with its parallel, highlighting the interconnectedness of past and present. The film masterfully captures the emotional turmoil experienced by the protagonist, depicting his internal struggle between inheriting his father's aggression and harboring the compassion to protect his loved ones.

The use of symbolism, such as the broken screen symbolizing anxiety and fear, adds depth to the storytelling, emphasizing the psychological impact of domestic violence. The composition of the scenes reflects a harmonious blend of memory and reality, showcasing the protagonist's journey towards redemption amidst the cycle of abuse.

Ultimately, "Samskara" offers a poignant reflection on the intergenerational effects of domestic violence and the possibility of breaking free from its destructive cycle. While Abhimanyu inherits his father's temper, he also embodies the resilience of the young boy who courageously saves his mother. The film serves as a powerful reminder that while heritage may dictate history, the future holds the potential for redemption and transformation.

Plot and Context of the film

This 11-minute short Hindi film unfolds as a poignant one-night tale, where the interplay of light sets the tone for the atmosphere and conditions of its characters. The narrative opens with a gripping scene of a baby and an adult hero running desperately through a deserted place. The focused light on their faces vividly portrays the contrasting emotions - the baby Abhimanyu's frightened and tear-streaked visage, juxtaposed with the adult Abhimanyu's furrowed brow and heavy breathing, hinting at the weight of past trauma.

Presented through a split-screen format, the film seamlessly weaves together two parallel narratives. On one side, we witness the young boy's return to his shattered home, marked by the aftermath of violence - a fallen chair, broken glass, and a half-empty bottle of alcohol. Meanwhile, on the other side of the screen, the adult Abhimanyu sits on a chair, mirroring his father's actions as he reaches for the bottle, drowning his sorrows in alcohol.

The central theme of the movie comes to light as the young boy attempts to comfort his wounded mother, hiding the gun used to end his father's violence. This pivotal moment is juxtaposed with the adult Abhimanyu's desperate plea to his wife, begging her not to leave him, as he grapples with the echoes of his traumatic past.

Throughout the film, poignant scenes capture the raw emotions of the characters - the panic and sobbing face of the young Abhimanyu after the fatal act, the bruised and battered mother bearing the scars of abuse, and the chilling moment when the adult Abhimanyu points the same gun at his wife and then at himself, illustrating the cycle of violence perpetuated through generations.

The thriller reaches its climax as the mother releases her pent-up frustration with a gut-wrenching cry, and Abhimanyu, now an adult, takes aim at the photo frame of his late father, symbolizing his defiance against the legacy of abuse.

The film concludes with a poignant rendition of a Hindi song, “yeh chaman hai sabka chaand suraj aur ye sitaren aur gagan he sabka...” sung together by the mother and the adult Abhimanyu, signifying a sense of liberation and freedom from the shackles of domestic violence. It poetically underscores the message that in families affected by domestic violence, not only are the primary victims impacted, but the children too bear the scars of trauma.

Conclusion

Children's reactions to witnessing or experiencing domestic violence between parents are diverse and multifaceted. There is no singular or predictable response, but extensive research indicates that exposure to domestic violence frequently leads to negative behavioral outcomes in children. By expanding our understanding and research efforts surrounding child abuse and domestic violence, and situating them within the broader context of family violence, we can inform government policies and allocate resources effectively to support children living in environments marked by inter-parental conflict, thus paving the way for a brighter future for these children

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