

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

EXPOSURE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND IDENTITY  
DEVELOPMENT AMONG ADOLESCENT UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SOUTH  
AFRICA<sup>12</sup>

MALOSE S. MAKHUBELA

*University of Pretoria*

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<sup>1</sup> Address correspondence to Malose Makhubela, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Humanities, Pretoria, 0002 or e-mail (mmalose@webmail.co.za).

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*Summary.*—This study examined the relationship between exposure to domestic violence and identity development in a sample of 108 undergraduate students with an average age of 18.7 yr. from University of Limpopo in South Africa. There were more women ( $n=64$ ; 58.7%) in the study than men ( $n=45$ ; 41.3%). Adolescents were classified into high and low domestic violence exposure groups on the basis of a median split in physical violence scores from the Child Exposure to Domestic Violence Scale (CEDV). Exposure was then compared with identity development as measured by the Ochse and Plug Erikson scale. The results indicated a significant mean difference between the two groups on identity development. Furthermore, exposure to domestic violence was significantly associated with lower scores for identity development as represented by subscales measuring trust, autonomy, initiative and other Eriksonian constructs. Implications and limitations of the study are discussed.

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South Africa is a violent society, characterised by a history of brutal crimes and racial conflicts (Dawes, Kafaar, des Sas Kropiwnicki, Pather & Richter, 2004; Kubeka, 2008). Nonetheless, an often underestimated form of violence is that of domestic abuse characterised by physical, sexual and psychological abuse (Dissel & Ngubeni, 2003; Vetten & Bhana, 2001). Available indicators of children's well-being, in the form of the high incidence of child mortality rates and physical and sexual abuse, suggest that South Africa remains a hostile environment for its children and that violence is a ubiquitous phenomenon in the country (Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2005; Ward, Martin, Theron & Distiller, 2007; WHO, 2002). The effects of exposure to violence committed against a family member by another member are quite disturbing and vary widely among children and specifically, children of different developmental stages (Dawes, *et al.*, 2004; Sternberg, Lamb, Guterman & Abbott, 2006).

Brooks (1985) suggested a focus on two phenomena—Fairbairn's (1952) "intrapsychic identification of bad objects" occurring as a consequence of trauma, and Erikson's (1968) "the search for Truth" epitomising adolescent identity formation—that come into conflict during the adolescent stage. Fairbairn's structural theory of personality, thus identity, emphasises the importance of the environment in forming inner ego structures and that there can be disastrous consequences for infants who are confronted by a non-nurturing environment (Celani, 1999). Fairbairn (1952) attributed intrapsychic resistance to the resurgence and exploration of traumatic childhood memories and suggested that recognising the child's identification with his/her "bad objects" (which, in Fairbairn's terms, means unsatisfying and depriving) is central to understanding the child's reluctance to give any account of the traumatic experience and memory. That is, "if the child's objects present themselves as bad, he/she himself feels bad. The

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child assumes the burden of badness that appears to reside in his/her objects. They seek to cleanse them of their badness, in proportion to the success in doing so; derives a sense of security from the fact that the world around him is good” (Brooks, 1985, p.402). The “badness” in the adverse qualities of the parents (i.e., depression, disorder and aggression) is now in him/her. The undesirable features become “bad objects” that the ego identifies, through primary identification. This underscores the denial and repression that punctuate the child’s reaction to the traumatic experience of violence.

Erikson (1968) proposed a different conception of identity formation-the Epigenetic model of identity development. He asserted that reality and truth regarding self become essential, because without “Truth,” the adolescent ego cannot organise the self-concept in accordance with its expanding capacities and involvements. Although at earlier stages of development the reliance on infantile stereotypes is normative, there is an inconsistency on “Truth” in adolescence. Adolescents insist on the “Truth” because it points beyond itself to the possibility of a new and altered sense of self (Brooks, 1985, p.402). Identity development is affected by both changes occurring within the socio-cultural context and the individual (Erikson, 1968, p.23). So, if an adolescent is exposed to domestic violence and searches within and without (in role models and socio-cultural matrix) for personal identity, the need to maintain one’s objects as good must necessarily come into conflict with the growing sense of self. Consequently, adolescents with such experiences should have a need for repression and denial on the one hand, and a need for revelation on the other. Brooks (1985) posited that the potency of the repression and denial associated with a history of exposure to abuse frequently has the effect of impeding or terminating the adolescent’s search for “Truth” which leads then to a premature closure of identity development. Marcia (1966) terms this identity foreclosure, which is a premature

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formation of identity without resolving the conflicts inherent in an identity crisis. This closure in turn might have adverse effects on adult psychological health, such as acting out violence and repressing emotions.

Researchers like Thom and Coetzee (2004) have asserted that from a developmental perspective, adolescents from unstable or violent families do not have apt role models, and this limits the opportunities that exist for developing of trust, autonomy and initiative. These characteristics are important for coping with the demands of the environment and overcoming role confusion, which according to Erikson (1968), are necessary for developing a sense of identity. All of these theories lead one to expect that exposure to violence in childhood and adolescence should affect the development of identity. Based on this rationale, the following hypotheses were proposed: (1) there will be a significant difference in identity development scores between high and low exposure to violence, and (2) there will be a significant relationship between identity development scores and exposure to violence, specifically according to Fairbairn and Erikson's, foreclosure and lower trust, autonomy and initiative.

### Method

#### *Participants*

A cross-sectional survey was conducted among a convenience sample of 108 adolescents. Participants were first-year psychology students of the University of Limpopo (Turfloop Campus), ages 15 to 20 years (64 women, 45 men), with the mean age 18.7 yr. ( $SD = 0.9$ ). Of all the participants, 104 (96.3%) were Black and 4 (3.7%) were Coloured. All the participants stated that they were living at home during the time when the survey was done. Family composition varied, with almost two-thirds of the participants ( $n = 68$ ; 62.4%) stating that they lived with

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both their biological parents, 22 (20.2%) lived with their mother and stepfather or mothers' boyfriends, nine (8.3%) lived with their father and stepmother or fathers' girlfriends, and 10 (9.1%) lived with others (such as grandparents and relatives).

### *Measures*

Three measures were used: a demographic questionnaire, the Ochse and Plug Erikson Scale and the Child Exposure to Domestic Violence Scale.

*Demographic Information.*—Participants were asked to provide information on their background and current family situation. All the respondents indicated their age, sex, ethnic identification and family structure (whether they were living with two biological parents, a single parent, step-parents, or others).

*Ochse and Plug Erikson Scale* (Ochse, 1983; Ochse & Plug, 1986).—This is a self-report questionnaire that measures identity development according to Erikson's concepts. The scale comprises 59 items and consists of five subscales that measure Trust vs. Mistrust (e.g., "I feel people trust me") Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (e.g., "I am unnecessarily apologetic"), Initiative vs. Guilt (e.g., "I feel guilty when I am enjoying myself"), Industry vs. Inferiority (e.g., "People think I am lazy") and Identity vs. Identity diffusion (e.g., "I wonder what sort of person I really am"). All are rated on a 4-point adjective scale anchored by 1: Never to 4: Very often. The aggregate score (i.e., possible score range from 58 to 236) shows the extent to which participants have developed a sense of trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry in their childhood and the extent of identity formation during adolescence (Ochse & Plug, 1986; Peacock & Theron, 2007). The scale was constructed with a sample of white Afrikaans-speaking, white English-speaking and black African-language speaking (i.e., who were from more than 10

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different language groups) participants (aged 15-20 years), and displayed both discriminant and convergent validity when correlated to the Well-Being and Social Desirability scales (Ochse & Plug, 1986). The internal consistency of the scale for each of these groups was adequate, with Cronbach alphas of .92 for white Afrikaans- and English-speaking participants and .86 for Black participants (Ochse & Plug, 1986; Thom & Coetzee, 2004). The normative data of the scale in South Africa: English-speaking participants ( $M = 173$ ,  $SD = 23$ ), Afrikaans-speaking ( $M = 175$ ,  $SD = 23$ ) and Black participants ( $M = 174$ ,  $SD = 25$ ).

*Child Exposure to Domestic Violence scale (CEDV).*—This children’s self-report is an adaptation of some well-developed family violence scales like the Conflict Tactics Scales (Edleson, Ellerton, Seagren, Kirchberg, Schmidt & Ambrose, 2007). The CEDV consists of 42 items in three sections, which assesses the types of exposure to domestic violence a child may have experienced (both as a witness and direct victim) and demographic characteristics (e.g., “How often has your mom’s partner done something to hurt her body”). Responses of the test were scored on a 4-point adjective scale, ranging from 0: Never to 3: Almost Always. Scores could vary from 0 to 99. The CEDV subscales showed variability in Cronbach alphas ranging from  $\alpha = .50$  to  $.76$  and overall  $\alpha = .84$ . Test–retest reliability for each subscale ranged from  $.57$  to  $.70$  over two weeks. Its convergent validity compares with that of the TISH (Things I Heard and Seen) which is designed to measure the same construct, and were found to be positively correlated to exposure to violence at home ( $r = .49$ ) and exposure to violence in the community ( $r = .40$ ) (Bailey, Hannigan, Delaney-Black, Covington & Sokol, 2006; Edleson, Shin & Armendariz, 2008; Richters & Martinez, 1990).

The internal consistency of the scales for the adolescents exposed to domestic violence and identity development in the present study was also calculated in terms of Cronbach’s alpha

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and was comparable to those reported by Edleson, *et al.* (2008) and Ochse and Plug (1986). The reliability coefficient of the CEDV scale at  $\alpha = .85$  and of the Erikson scale at  $\alpha = .84$  were acceptable.

### *Procedure*

Prior to commencing with this survey, permission was obtained and the study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University. The participants were first requested to fill in consent forms. Then the Ochse and Plug Erikson Scale and CEDV were administered concurrently to the group of students in their lecture hall. The researcher explained to the participants how the questionnaires were to be completed. Four trained assistants were available at the data collection hall to clarify instructions and answer any questions that arose during the process. Participation in the research was voluntary, while confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

With respect to the emotional arousal the participants might have experienced following completion of the questionnaires, the following precautions were taken. The participants were debriefed at the end of the study and each was provided with the contact information of a trauma counselor and social worker at the University of Limpopo counseling centre, should they need any further psychological help. The researcher made arrangements with these professionals before the study commenced, to provide assistance to the participants that might contact them.

After data collection, participants were assigned into one of the two groups (i.e., High and Low) according to the level of exposure to domestic violence on the basis of a score they obtained. This was done using a median split procedure, with a median value of 50 on the CEDV scale.



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### *Analysis*

Data analysis was conducted using the computerized Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 18.0. The first analysis was the reliability coefficient (i.e., internal consistency) of the questionnaires used in this study. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation and percentage) were also computed and presented to provide an overall picture of the data obtained. Following this, a two-way ANOVA and regression analysis were employed to test the hypotheses.

### Results

The results shows that 34.9% of the 108 participants reported never being exposed to domestic violence and scored low on the CEDV scale, while 65.1% reported being exposed to domestic violence. Those exposed to domestic violence were both direct victims of abuse and witnesses of domestic violence, because they scored high on both the witness-only subscale and direct abuse subscale of the CEDV scale. Within the groups, 16.5% ( $n=18$ ;  $M=126.3$ ;  $SD=18.3$ ) of the male participants reported never having been exposed to domestic violence as compared to 18.4% ( $n=20$ ;  $M=122.2$ ;  $SD=21.5$ ) of the females, while 24.8% ( $n=27$ ;  $M=113.0$ ;  $SD=17.4$ ) of the male participants had been exposed to domestic violence compared to 40.3% ( $n=44$ ;  $M=112.3$ ;  $SD=17.9$ ) of the females in the study. There were no statistically significant sex differences and none were expected.

To examine Hypothesis 1, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to test for significant group differences and interaction between the variables. Table 1 shows that those in the high Domestic Violence group had significantly different identity development scores than those who were not exposed ( $F_{1,109} = 9.39$ ,  $p < .02$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$ ). According to Table 1 there was a significant

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main effect for exposure group ( $F_{1,105} = 9.39, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .08$ ). Adolescents who had lower exposure to domestic violence (CEDV  $M = 123.1, SD = 19.9$ ) had higher identity development overall ( $M = 123.1, SD = 19.9$ ) than those adolescents who had higher exposure to domestic violence (CEDV  $M = 112.6, SD = 17.6$ ; Identity development ( $M = 112.6, SD = 17.6$ )).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that there would be a significant relationship between identity development scores and exposure to violence. The results show that exposure to domestic violence made a significant contribution to identity development ( $F_{1,107} = 6.70, p < .05$ ). Identity development was apparently affected by exposure to violence. For every one unit change in exposure to violence, identity development scores were changed by  $-0.27$ . A high exposure to domestic violence statistically significantly decreased the scores on identity development.

### Discussion

The findings of this study imply that adolescents who are exposed to domestic violence have lower scores for identity development compared to those from non-violent homes. This finding is consistent with the theory and findings of previous empirical studies, in that, exposure to domestic violence is associated with lower trust, autonomy, and initiative, broader intimacy issues and identity foreclosure in adolescents (Erikson, 1963; Levendorsky, Huth-Bocks, & Semel, 2002; Murrell, *et al.*, 2007; Schiavone, 2009). Schiavone (2009) found that inner-city adolescents (13–18 years) exposed to domestic violence were pessimistic about relating with others and had challenges relating to issues of autonomy, identity, and intimacy. Researchers have suggested that adolescents encounter more difficult sex roles, sex identity development and formation of self-concept and moral self, when growing up in a home with domestic violence as compared to those in non-violent homes (Bernhardt, 2004; Bourassa, 2007; Duerden, 2006;

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Finkelhor, Ormrod & Turner, 2007; Morrell & Swart, 2005). This is consistent with Fairbairn's (1952) thesis that self-representations of children from violent and unstable families are defensively distorted and that, in adolescence, this provides an erroneous foundation for self-definition and consequent identity formation (Brooks, 1985).

The significant association between exposure to domestic violence and identity development found here suggests that adolescents' exposure to domestic violence is associated with lower identity development. The results support prior studies conducted in Nigeria, South Africa and other countries which indicated that domestic violence negatively affect adolescents' psychosocial well-being, and adolescents further demonstrate poorer adjustment to various life purviews, poor self-perceptions and an external locus of control than do relative norm groups (Abrahams, Garcia-Moreno, Jewkes, Penn-Kekana & Watts, 2000; Adegoke & Oladeji, 2008; Dawes, *et al.*, 2004; Holt, Buckley & Whelan, 2008; Kubeka, 2008; Levendorsky, *et al.*, 2002; Makama, 2003; Schiavone, 2009; Singh, 2003; Themistocleous, 2008). Levendorsky, *et al.* (2002) reported that witnessing domestic violence had a latent effect on adolescents' ability to establish trusting relationships. The effects of violence experienced in childhood may carry on into adolescence, thereby affecting peer relationships and dating behaviour. Adolescence in these aggressive environments experience the crisis of resolving issues of trust, autonomy and initiative, and this consequentially perturb their potential to establish functional interpersonal relationships and thus form attachments.

Accordingly, adolescents in these situations do not want to identify with the hostility of the perpetrator, or the powerlessness of the victim. Both boys and girls are offered problematic sex roles in this situation, which may affect adversely the way in which they see the opposite sex or themselves (Loseke, Gelles & Cavanaugh, 2005; Kitzmann, *et al.*, 2003; Whitefield, Anda,

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Dube, & Felitti, 2003). Mullender and Morley (1994) found that witnessing male domination and female submission affects the development of the adolescents' own sex identities and how they relate to the opposite sex. Swenson and Prelow (2005) further established that the adolescent's perception of having violent parents affects the process of developing their self-concept and self control, and how to learn to relate to others.

Findings of this study have implications for secondary prevention of domestic violence in South African adolescents. It is recommended that further research be done with a larger sample and control for the effects of SES on identity development.

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Table 1: ANOVA showing effects of exposure to domestic violence on identity development of adolescents

Variable	Mean square	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	$\eta^2_p$	<i>p</i>
Exposure to violence (A)	3234.05	9.39	1, 105	.08	.02*
Sex (B)	139.17	0.40	1, 105	.004	ns
A × B	68.24	0.20	1, 105	.002	ns
Error	344.24		1, 105		
	109		1521897.00		