Explaining child abuse in the Algerian society

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Abstract:

        The use of physical punishment by parents, as a means of educating their children when other peaceful methods of socialization fail, has thoroughly been studied in this paper.

Indeed, research has proven that physical as well as symbolic punishment, despite parents' good intention of well rearing their children, has the same consequences of other forms of violence. We departed in this work from the hypothesis that physical punishment increases rather than decreases the aggressive tendencies of children whether at home, in the street or at school. And, in order to explain the occurrence of violence in the Algerian society, we focused on the family as a place where child abuse takes place, thereby using influencing violence against children.

  Last, there is substantial evidence for concluding that not only, children who have been exposed to physical or emotional abuse were violent but also, violence is deeply rooted in culturally approved ways of educating children in the Algerian society.

الملخص:

إن وجود تناقضات في نظام القيم والمعايير الاجتماعية المتمثلة في ترعرع الطفل في جو متسلط يغيب فيه مبدأ الحوار الهادئ وتأثير الثقافة السائدة في المجتمع الذي يسمح بالتشدد في التعامل مع الأطفال واستخدام العقاب المعنوي والجسدي يساعد على إحداث اضطراب في نفس الطفل. وتكون نتيجة ذلك الانعزالية والاغتراب وفقدان الثقة بالذات إلى حد الانفعال الحاد والعدوانية. ونتيجة لذلك الشعور، فإن هذا الطفل سوف يعتبر نفسه أقل جاذبية، وذكاء وكفاءة من أقرانه. فباستخدام العقاب الجسدي لا يعتقد الأولياء في الجزائر بأنهم يمارسون ما يسمى بسوء معاملة الأطفال ضد أبنائهم فحسب، بل إنهم يعتقدون بيقين أن العقاب الجسدي له فائدة لكونه جزءا أساسيا من الأساليب التربوية الفعالة دون إعارة أي اهتمام إلى الآثار التي يخلفها هذا الأخير على شخصية الطفل وسلوكه في المستقبل. إذ يصبح الطفل الذي ينشأ عن طريق المعاملة السيئة والقاسية، هو الآخر يعتقد أن استعمال القوة والعنف أمر مفيد ولازم لبلوغ الأهداف.

Introduction :

A child's family environment is a social milieu wherein social, physical, religious, economic and educational factors affect his childhood, adolescence and adult life in a positive as well as negative way.

As such, recent research is greatly concerned by this area of social and psychological work focusing on harmful social, physical and environmental factors that directly or indirectly influence the personality and behavioral development of the child.

Theoretical Framework:

While some studies confirmed that the feeling of belongingness, warmth, security and acceptance as well as positive personality childrearing patterns are crucial factors to the child physical, and biological development (E. Erikson, 1959; D. Baumrind, 1975; B. F. Steele, 1977; A. Maslow, 1977, M. Berger, 1997; I. Angélino, 1997…), other studies, have shown that experiences of emotional and physical abuse in childhood, have a negative impact on the social and personality development of the child (B. Davis and B. Leone, 1994; P. Verdier, 1997; R.M. Youssef and H.Y. Atta, 1998...).

Child abuse is the deliberate infliction of physical or emotional injury to a child. In our research, the abuser of the child is supposed to be either the father or the mother or both, and the mistreated child can be either a boy or a girl.

In physical abuse, the injuries can be inflicted to the child by punching, kicking, biting, burning or beating. While mistreatment, can result in bruises, burns or broken bones.

Psychological abuse on the other hand, includes rejecting (not talking to the child for days, even weeks), ignoring, criticizing, belittling, humiliating or treating the child severely. It often encompasses isolating the child from his brothers and sisters, neighbors or school friends, confiscating his own belongings (mobile, TV, computer, Xbox, play station...) or depriving him from the right to play or pocket money (*en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_abuse*).

According to D. Dean, The manner in which the emotional, physiological and security needs are met, may be the single most significant factor in determining the child attitude, adjustment and performance. As a matter of fact, many studies have also confirmed that physical or emotional abuse, emotional neglect or assault may have a devastating impact on the child's life (Finkelhor, 1986; Lewis, 1992; Gavarini, 1998; Roseman and al, 1998…).

To illustrate the commonness of the phenomenon of child abuse in Algeria, series of testimonies were taken from some victims:

➢ A. Islam (16 years old, college student and football player):

»When I was in high school, I could not perform academically or compete successfully against my peers as well as my parents' expectations. My failure to excel in class as well as in sports competitions was very disappointing to both of them. As a result of my lack of accomplishment, I was underestimated, humiliated and deprived from leisure and cultural activities with friends for weeks. The most painful thing that I remember today; that I became a brilliant college student, is the fact that my father hardly spoke to me during that period of adolescence, when I was really in need of his support...».

➢ B. Faiza (15 years old, a school dropout, in charge of housework):

»I am the eldest of six brothers and sisters. My mother expects me to take over the responsibility of the house whenever she is busy. I try to do my best in assuming the tasks of taking good care of my younger brothers (2) and sisters (3), in addition to helping them with homework and doing housework. Unfortunately, I am never capable of satisfying her. There is always something wrong in the house; a broken glass, a complaint from a brother or some clumsiness. As a result, my mom gets angry and scolds me severely. Not only do I feel unwanted at all times, but it happens also that I think of suicide, the best way to make her happy».

Indeed, this kind of child abuse affects kids psychologically even in their adulthood.

➤ As Mrs. B. Leila (28 years old, married, no children, housewife) puts it:

"I was punished verbally and physically very frequently by both my parents when I was young. My bad results in school were always a good excuse to scold and humiliate me in front of my younger sister, who succeeded in school. They never gave me love, attention or care. In fact, what was embarrassing and shameful for me as a child became agonizing for me today as a grown up person. The fact that; I live with an abusive husband, and not having anyone to turn to in case of physical or moral abuse, makes me feel miserable. Sometimes, I even think that I am cursed, and thus deserve to be unfortunate…».

Mrs. Leila stopped talked for a while; had a vacant stare that lasted few minutes, then suddenly, in a barely audible tone, she sighed (as if she was talking to herself):

"It's strange, but I often think that I could be a good mother, only if I gave birth to a boy. So maybe will he be spared, as was my brother! Having a girl, would be an ordeal which breeds in my life, what a life... »

In using symbolic or physical punishment, Algerian parents not only believe, that they do such a thing because the children deserve to be punished when; they exert a misconduct or show disrespect, fail to meet their expectations either in school, sporting activities or in simply being well – mannered kids rather, they are convinced that punishment is beneficial to them as being a part of their early education. As a result of this, habitually a lot of incidents of violence occur in the Algerian family, because the parents consider them in particular and, adults in general as a necessary educational tool.

In our society, physical punishment is accepted and often encouraged by adult members, out of fear of the harm that can come to the child if he/she is not adequately disciplined. Indeed, some parents even believe that if their own parents were more severe and more punitive towards them as immature children, they would have been successful as

parents today. Thus, violence is used first to teach and control and second, to discipline and punish misbehavior. It is viewed as an effective tool for educating and controlling children.

Mrs. B. Atika (4 children) and Mrs. A. Samia (3 children) explain respectively:

➢ Mrs. B. Atika: »Well, for me violence is a way of calling to order. I often use screaming and whining and finally punishing physically or verbally to straighten up the child. If I give strict orders and the child ignores them or impudently disobeys, then a violent response is the rule…».

➢ Mrs. A. Samia: »As long as the child is old enough to understand and differentiate between what is good and what is definitely wrong, if he goes out of the way, then he deserves to be humiliated or beaten. It is a family rule and they know it …».

These statements clearly show that when a parent fails to communicate a message to a child or, when the child himself does not get the message, there is use of physical violence. Parents use spanking, slapping or calling the child ugly or humiliating names to teach him how to behave well, or show a submissive behavior.

Thus, parents feel that physical force is an understandable technique to teach quickly and efficiently. This is explained by the fact that parents fail to educate their offspring by using other methods such as patience, communication, or non-violent scolding; methods, they generally think of as being slow acting and dissatisfying.

The social - learning theory is timely at this point, to put the stress on the strong link between the use of force and violence by parents and the process of legitimizing their use by their children. Moreover, in the Muslim world in general, and in the Algerian society in particular, physical punishment is a culturally accepted social practice.

Therefore, as long as the abuse does not result in a physical handicap or death, physical punishment does not derange and remain a family matter. As well, our society has developped absolute taboos against corporal punishment and, eventhough it has adopted strict laws and sanctions against

its use, practice of physical punishment in the Algerian society is neither denounced nor discouraged by the young people of today.

Alongside this, in our society, the child is considered as the property and the responsibility of his parents and as such, they have absolute control over his/her life. In addition, unfortunately, teachers at their own discretion (in spite of the annual letters of recall from the Ministry of education against corporal punishment), still use symbolic punishment like humiliating, upsetting or expelling students or physical force like slapping or using the stick for purposes of teaching and disciplining or just restoring order inside their classrooms.

As a result of all this, child abuse in our society is dealt with as a pattern of interaction between the parent or the caretaker and the child. Moreover, since the Algerian penal law failed to establish criteria for identifying abusive treatments and differentiating between deliberate   acts and accidental ones, abusive parents and even teachers do not fear legal proceedings.

As a matter of fact, it rarely comes to the mind of a family member, a neighbor or even a doctor in the emergency ward to bear witness of abusive incidents and conditions. Beyond that, we often observe parents calling on the community's help in order to back up the traditional family patterns. This tolerant attitude observed in the Algerian society, reflects the cultural approval of certain measures of physical abuse of children by their parents. Beyond that, the cultural theory refers to the role model approach (J. L. Singer, 1971; Owens and M.A. Strauss, 1975; Konner, 1978; I. Angélino, 1997…).

It is obvious that parents or caretakers do not abuse children by instinct. But it remains, that their behavior is not explained so much by the cultural theory, which emphasizes the approval of violence in the value system and social norms of the society, as by their prior socialization, in which they experienced abuse (A. Bandura and R.M. Walters, 1974; D.W. Felkner, 1974; Steel and Pollak, 1978; D. Baumrind, 1978…).

In fact, parents want their children very much to be good (meaning obedient, well brought up, respectful and attentive to their dictates); as such,

they consider that a bad upbringing, would affect their children's future lives adversely. From this perspective, it is reasonable that they punish their children at an early age for failure to achieve their expectations (Dollard and al, 1939; A. Miller, 1941; Berkowitz, 1962; Wesley and al, 1979…). As a result, children are socialized and also trained in their young days in the use of force and violence. In this way, young chidren are transformed into adults inculcating in them the values, norms and social role habits of the family and society as a whole (Sears, 1953; A. Bandura, 1974; Becker, 1964; J.A. Mc cord and al, 1983…).

Like the learning theory and the cultural theory (which is considered an extension to the learning theory propositions), the social control theory can also be very important in explaining violence in the family. This theory argues that violence is a resource, which can be used to achieve desired ends. It is then, an ideal action where the person conceives of a goal and establishes a set of means to reach the goal.

Violence then, provides such a vehicle because of the individual's experience in cultural or sub cultural settings which covertly or overtly authorize or even encourage violent behavior (S.K. Steinmetz and M.A. Strauss, 1974; B and J Whiting, *1975;* Carroll, 1975; Coser, 1970; Kim and Kim, 1997; Sondra Seung JA doe, 2000…).

Thus, Algerian men are very much likely to adopt the path of using force and violent behavior with their children, peer groups or wives in order to establish a positive identity (being dominant, authoritarian, virile and respectable).

Then, force is meant to stop others from doing something we disapprove, either at the time they do it or, in the future because of a punishment experienced in the past or a threatening one in the future. In our case, force occurs only when parents want to prevent young children from carrying out deviant, improper or wrong acts. But the fact remains; that force and its treat are still used in the socialization process of children who come to believe that force is useful and desirable (Button, 1973; Owens and M.A. Strauss, 1975; Veno, 1974; Bach-Y-Rita and King, 1975; Burt, 1978; Pfouts and al, 1982…).

Another explanation, that could help us understand child abuse better has to do with expectations. Generally speaking, abusive parents expect far higher performances from their children than ordinary parents. These standards are so high and unrealistic that a normal child can never attain.

In fact, some parents wish that their children filled their own lack (i.e. succeeding in school, if they themselves have a low level of education). Others may feel diminished or unjustly punished by God if their children fail to meet their high-expected standards. For example, a mother who was deprived from school or who lives a miserable life with her husband because of the child's welfare would want her son to succeed in life, and a father who is not prestigious, but who values prestige, may want his son to have a good career.

The children, who do not bring in an income and do not help with the housework, have to be loyal, obedient and respectful toward their parents. And in exchange, parents give affection, financial and emotional support, security and daily assistance to their children. As such, a parent who supplies reward services (food, clothing, heat, security, comfort and shelter…) with hardness to his children requires of them fulfillment of family obligations. If this type of exchange is not honored, violence occurs, at the slightest opportunity. The frustration – aggression theory postulates that the tendency to show abusive behavior can be a response to the emotion which the individual feels when some goal is blocked (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1967; Sprey, 1969; Strauss and Steinmetz, 1974…).

Usually, low class parents take pains to provide all the necessities of life for their children, and if a parent feels an imbalance (ie: that the children are giving less than what they are getting) a situation of conflict is created, and may reach the point of emotional or physical abuse. Here, parents ask the children to satisfy their requirements for counter payments of devotion, care and concern. This give and take relationship may be harmless at that moment, and the intention of the parents may be both legitimate and positive. The children themselves may even understand it, but perpetuation of such violent behavior may become devastating.

In fact, these parents ignore that they are emotionally abusing their children, and believe that they are only doing what is best for them. They don't even notice the effort made by the children to satisfy them, or at least to receive back a sign of their approbation. As such, despite parental mistreatment, abused children never put blame on their highly demanding parents. However, it remains that they nourish a feeling of guilt and incapability of holding their parents' love and attention. Unfortunately, such children grow up with low self-esteem, high fear, anxiety, apprehension and suspicion that follow them to adulthood (F. Nietzsche, 1977; D. Dean, 1979; I. Angélino, 1984; Ney and al, 1994…). As a result, physical as well as emotional abuse is a long-term hazard to children's normal health and development.

In sum, child abuse history can be traced in the family of the abuser where, parents were probably raised in the same way that they have to rear their own children. Therefore, abused children are more likely to become as violent as their parents, once they grow up. Albeit, parents teach their children that violence is bad and conflicting with Islamic laws, norms and values, yet they start showing them at an early age that violence serves one's ends. In such cases, although children exposed to abuse, may have learned how painful and frustrating abuse is, they internalize it as a mode of dealing with their own children. Consequently, abused children once adults, already know effective and ineffective techniques to use in rearing and disciplining children. In this way, intra-family violence is passed along from generation to generation.

Thus, child abuse can be attributed to many factors that directly or indirectly provoke child beating in the Algerian family. In addition to the cultural factors, the socio-economic conditions may have an important explanatory power for child abuse.

Indeed, parents tend be more abusive when they have problems like unemployment, stress or instability. As a way of overcoming these difficulties, they tend to release their fear and frustration in physical, verbal and emotional attacks on their children.

Parents who are subject to unwanted pregnancy or who think that children are the cause of their daily problems can also be aggressive with their children.

As well, parents may have aggressive tendencies towads a problem child (disabled, not sharp, not complying with parental rules or directives, disruptive or delinquent).

Also, there is a high physical violence in large families since; the number of children often creates financial, emotional and psychological charge for the parents. Many studies have proven the week relationship between poverty and child abuse. With that matter, it has been found, that the factor of poverty, contributes in aggravating factors leading people to exert maltreatment against other persons and their children. But, it is not the main cause (Kent, 1976; R. M. Youssef and H. Y. Atta, 1998…).

Hence, the correlation between poor child care and large family size is conspicuous in the Algerian society; a society where only few parents are patient enough to use communication and reward in dealing with their children.

It is also observed, that while many low class parents in Algeria allow their children to spend most of their free time playing in the steets thereby, avoiding the use of physical punishment, nevertheless this practice is considered as a sign of abandonment and neglect. Contrary to such parents, others try hard to give their children time and concern, but choose physical punishment as a method of control. As a result, the latest may easily turn into abusive parents.

For example, Mrs. M. Amina, a mother of six children says:

"Living in a 3 bedroom - apartment with these young devils in charge, one has to be extremely patient not to use violence. Moreover, being a nuclear family, we receive no help from others (family in law or close relatives) in watching, rearing and educating kids».

In fact, violent behavior is only a response to frustration, anger, strain and fatigue. Undoubtedly, child abuse occurs in all different classes. However, lower class family members have fewer alternative resources of

any kind as compared, to other family members belonging to another social class. In fact, according to the frustration theory, low class people have less prestige, money or power and consequently suffer greater frustration and distress that lead to aggressive tendencies (D. Dean, 1979; V. J. Fontana, and V. Moolman, 1994…).

In addition to financial problems and stressful situations, low class parents could have experienced physical abuse during childhood and may suffer from health problems. Such parents were themselves given little attention or affection as children, a situation which creates a need for a response that will redress the imbalance of their past. Furthermore, the class factor leads us to say that rich people have many ways and more opportunities to escape and move off the children for a while whereas; poor parents who cannot afford to take their kids on vacation, to an amusement park or simply eating out to unwind, are condemned to stick to them all year long. Besides, the high class does not suffer from the problem of overcrowding, high cost of living or big family size. It is evident that these factors are known to be common sources of family tension and violence.

Although abusive parents have low emotional control, the abuser does not hit the child until he can rework the situation but, once he is convinced that the child deserves a physical punishment then, his super-ego approves the attack and punishment. Who among us never heard a furious parent shouting while beating a child: »Didn't I warn you again and again...?. In sum, once the physical attack is over, these parents still feel anger and frustration because not only mistreating the child is painful to both parents and children, but not being in control may be painful to parents.

In addition to the emotional and the psychological problems, early marriage, immature parents and low educational level can be direct causes of violence since, all these lead to continuous disagreement and underestimation between the spouses. Overwork, anxiety and homesickness also tend to evoke an aggressive action. Mr. A. Faouzi (4 children) manifests this situation by saying:

My wife is a kind person. She is usually gentle and patient with the kids, but I often notice a change of attitude whenever, she stays too long

with the children without really being in contact with members of her family. She either keeps silent or, shows brutality in making the kids comply with her rules. It only takes a weekend with her own family to turn her into a loving mother again. I personally take it as a sign of having had enough with babysitting, washing and cooking throughout the day. It is important to balance between her obligations and leisure time».

As well, intermarriage, which is still a common phenomenon in our society, can produce stress and confict in the family, a situation that provokes a violent behavior. As Mrs B. Salima (5 children) puts it:

»I married my cousin and, we both love each other but living with my aunt and cousins makes our life miserable. For us, daily quarrels are becoming a way of life. But, the problem is when my husband runs of patience; he either gets back at me or at the children».

Also, it is important to recall sex and gender relationships in order to understand the origin of intra-family violence. For example, in Algeria as in the Arab-Muslim world, where the family is patriarchal, one observes elements of patriarchy such as the right of males to be serviced by females, the right of males to discipline youngsters and, the acceptance of male violence towards women. Thus, beside the parents, the elder brothers exercise customary power over younger members of the family in general and, particularly young females. Thus, violence is taught to young boys not only for self-defence but, for helping the parents to discipline and control non-submissive females as well. Consequently, the male has total control over his sister whether or not she is older or more educated. In some cases, even married women in our society complain from their brothers' harshness. For example, the case of Sara (18 years old) is common:

Being at home, Sara was forbidden by her older brother from leaving the house, at all times, with no chaperon. One day, as she was secretely going downtown with a female friend, she bumped into him in the street. As a result, Sara was brought back home with heavy kicks and punches. Once she arrived, her brother still behaving like a madman hit her this time with a pair of pincers. Sara lost her sight while her brother remained unpunished. This deliberate and horrible incident has been

camoufled by the entire family and, turned into an unfortunate and unintentional accident. According to her family, Sara who defied her brother' authority was guilty as well».

This type of violence could be due to repressive norms of sexual reationships prevailing in our Muslim society. For example, not only sex is considered as a sin in our society but, it is also seen as an intrinsic evil since, sex is prohibited along with other interpersonal relations. Therefore, males who are given the heavy task of safeguarding women's honour may show an aggressive behavior toward the least sign implying or leading to an interpersonal relationship between the two sexes. Thus, standing on the balcony or going downtown without a chaperon is still interpreted by very extremist families as a threat to the family and therefore is socially condemned.

Lastly, the resource theory stipulates that force and violence is also used as a resource when other resources are insufficient or lacking (Brown, 1965; Toby, 1966; W. Goode, 1971; O'brien, 1971…). Thus, a brother or a husband who wants to be the dominant member of the family, but has little or no education and a job which is low in prestige or too small to cover family expenses without the contribution of either a sister or a mother, and lacks interpersonal skills to compensate for his weakness, may show a violent attitude to maintain that dominant position in the family. In addition, such males may resort to force or violence to redress grievances, when they have few or no alternative resources at their disposal.

Eventually, there may be mentioned that, usually parental physical punishment includes such things as:

- Slapping the child's hand or smacking his face.

- Spanking or shocking the child

- Burning the child with a match or a cigarette.

- Punching, Kicking or pinching a child.

And, regarding emotional abuse, it may include:

- Insulting the child for the least clumsiness.

- Humiliating the child in front of relatives, school friends, neighbors or strangers.

- Spitting on the child's face or making the movement of spitting on him, without really spitting on him (which has the same psychological consequence).

- Underestimating and belittling the child at all times.

In terms of the methods of parental violence, the mothers are more violent than the fathers for every kind of violence except punching or kicking. This is explained by the fact that mothers in Algeria spend more time with children.

Dr. M.T. Brighet, a private general practitioner, testifies of some kinds of injuries inflicted on the children by parents or other family members:

- Burns with boiling water, an iron or a hair dryer.

- Squinting as a result of heavy slapping.

- Bruises and lacerations.

- Wounds and cuts.

- Slamming or pushing the child on the wall.

- Bone fracture or freezing exposure as a result of being thrown to the street.

In addition, Dr. M.T. Brighet sadly evokes the case of a three year old child; he had his fingers amputated after being hit savagely by his father using a ruler, for having damaged the family new couch. The sofa was replaced whereas; the father sunk into grief and regrets.

Some parents were shocked at themselves since, they didn't know how violent they could be until they had children. Indeed, some apologized to their children or explained that they were going through a period of hard work, tension or stress. In this case, as mentioned before, violence is an effective action, but it can quickly become a habit of dealing immediately with emotional situations, that may arise at any moment of the day. As a

result, violence in the family can serve as a means of communication; however its consequences on the child can be troublesome.

In sum, We wish to make it clear that in the absence of values and social norms against corporal punishment, whether in schools, in child care settings, in the family or even in the street, the existence of written laws and severe sanctions against abuse of any kind is not enough by itself. Therefore, we are compelled to suggest programs that help change norms and practices by reeducating marital parents, teachers and child care professionals as well as discrediting the male-dominant ideology which weighs heavy on our society. Moreover controlling the   size of the family and improving economic and housing conditions may contribute to the decrease of intra-family violence.

Conclusion:

Finally, a child is more likely to become a non-aggressive person if, his/her parent not only holds the value that aggression is bad but also, prevents it from happening by means other than physical punishment. Many parents think that in rearing the child, they have to choose between affection or leniency and discipline or aggression. In   reality, the correct approach to children's education includes both affection and discipline. The child should be rewarded for a good conduct however; he must be disciplined in case of misbehavior with an appropriate and non-aggressive method. In any case, parents should keep in mind that a child reared in a violent social environment, learns at a young age to use force and violence with his brothers and sisters at home, his peer group in the street or teachers at school.

Thus, I suggest that parents use non-violent means in rearing their children but, in the case of absolute necessity, I encourage them to accompany a mild physical punishment with a good explanation.

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