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A CULTURAL-CONSISTENCY THEORY OF FAMILY VIOLENCE IN
MEXICAN-AMERICAN AND JEWISH SUBCULTURES^{*}

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ACQUISITIONS

A subculture arises because not all of the values beliefs or norms in a society have equal status. A primary allocation to some of these values, beliefs or norms is made. Subcultural variants may partially accept, sometimes deny, or even construct antitheses of, elements of the central, wider, or dominant values, yet remain within the cultural system (Wolfgang, 1967:99).

Where a norm is widely shared among the members of a subsociety but lacks majority support in the total society, we can speak of a subcultural norm, of a groupway rather than a folkway (Yinger, 1965:75).

The concept of the subculture of violence generally refers to norms which deal directly with the extent to which violence may be used and the conditions under which it is permissible. However, this conceptualization does not deal with the question of how such norms and values come into being and why they persist as cultural patterns. One explanation of the development of these cultural patterns asserts that specific cultural elements reflect the operation of the culture as a system within which cultural norms concerning violence can be deduced from other norms and values characteristic of a group.

To understand how the term ethnic subculture is used here, one can think of a group of people whose norms for family life are not identical to those generally accepted by the larger society, are not supported by a majority of the larger society, but which are shared by members of that particular ethnic group. Here, norms for family life refer to the more basic norms of the subculture rather than norms which deal explicitly with violence. Examples of more basic norms are guidelines for family power relations, the practice of religion, and desired family structure.

The purpose of this paper is to develop such a cultural-consistency theory of violence and to apply this theory to Mexican-American and Jewish ethnic subcultures. ^{1/} Structural explanations which assert that a culture reflects the typical personality of a society's members, are recognized as valid explanations of cultural patterns. Although structural and psychological factors are important for a full understanding of a culture, they are omitted from the present paper to allow room to adequately develop cultural-consistency theory.

Although they are not concerned with specific subcultures, Parsons and Shils discussion of the consistency of cultural patterns can be applied to them. They state

A CULTURAL-CONSISTENCY THEORY OF VIOLENCE

Since the overall goal of this paper is to explain the cause of family violence in certain ethnic groups in terms of cultural-consistency, it is first necessary to define what is meant by a subculture. The following two passages explain this concept from the normative perspective which is

Cultural patterns tend to become organized into systems. The peculiar feature of this systematization is a type of integration which we may call consistency of pattern (1953:21). The consistency of pattern of such a system will exist to the extent to which the same combination of value judgments...runs consistently throughout the actors' responses to different situations; that is, to a different class of objects, different objects in the same class, and the same objects on different occasions (1953:172).

System, as used above, refers to the interdependent organization of individual or collective orientations toward a particular nonsocial or

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or social object. Social objects may be individuals or collectivities (1953:5). Cultural patterns refer to the extent to which systems of ideas or beliefs, and systems of value orientations which are "the evaluations of alternatives from the viewpoint of their consequences of implications for a system" (1953:8) are shared by members of a culture.

According to Parsons and Shils the problem for the student of culture is to determine this core of value judgments mentioned above which lead to consistency of patterns.

In order therefore to determine the existence of systematic coherence where there has not been explicit systematization, it is necessary for the student of culture to uncover the explicit culture and to detect whatever common premises may underlie apparently diverse and unconnected items of orientation (1953:22).

The position taken in this paper is that for ethnic subcultures the "common premises" which constitute the source of members' actions in all areas of life are the basic norms of the subculture. Thus, to arrive at the actual level use of family violence we must examine the basic family norms of the subculture.

There is little doubt that norms for family violence do exist in some ethnic groups. Parnus, in a review of police methods of handling domestic quarrels, states that most police feel that "domestic disturbances are a part of daily living that most people take for granted" (1964:914). Also, police often do not arrest offenders in a family argument because

The offense may be thought to be conduct which is acceptable to the culture of the disputants and therefore not seriously objectionable to the disputants (1964:930).

An example which deals more specifically with family violence follows

...An officer who came across a Negro woman who had been badly beaten by her lover showed none of the feelings of indignation and sympathy he might have revealed had she been white. There were some exceptions, of course, as there usually are, but generally speaking the white policeman saw beatings and stabbings as customs of the Negro sections, like shooting craps (Parnus, 1964:949).

The following excerpt from an article by Fennell shows that in years past family violence was even within the bounds of the law.

Canon Law in years past accepted wife-beating as a fair means of keeping a spouse in order, a hundred years ago it was an unquestioned pattern in many families, due in part to the lack of status of a woman, and in part to their chattel value in a marriage (1974:15).

An ethnic group whose norms support the use of family violence will be more willing to use it and thus will have a higher level of violence and will be known as a violent ethnic group. Also, if the norms of an ethnic group are against the use of family violence, members of that group will be less willing to use violence. The following example illustrates the relationship between a normative code for violence and action taken in following that code.

A man who choked his fifteen year old daughter to death because he said she flirted with boys has just been released from prison on a presidential pardon after serving nine months of a seven year sentence.

The father, Abdallah Wawhar Sharid, a well-to-do Saudi Arabian, benefited from a custom here, established in the penal code, that permits a man to kill a female member of his family who "dishonors the family" through sexual misconduct (deOnis, 1973:8).

Consonant with the norm-violence relationship is the idea that the culture within which one is immersed has a great effect on the development of the individual's personality. Parson and Shils state that

"...whatever its systematic form, a culture pattern may be internalized to become part of the structure of personality (1953:22)." Combining this statement with the idea that one's personality effects how an individual acts in certain situations, we could say that a cultural pattern which includes a number of norms for family violence could lead to a "violent" personality which in turn could lead to a greater number of violent acts by a family member of that subculture.

The final question to be dealt with in the development of a theory of ethnic subcultural family violence is how the norms of this subculture remain strong from generation to generation. Wolfgang places the emphasis for the perpetuation of subcultural norms for violence on learning processes.

The development of favorable attitudes toward, and the use of violence in a subculture usually involves learned behavior and a process of differential learning, association, or identification (1967:160).

Since imitation is a powerful learning process (Bandura, 1973), one could say that the greater the amount of violence used by parents toward a child and toward each other, the greater the chance that the child will act violently later in life. The child may come to believe that the best way to have people act the way he wants them to is to use physical force on them.

At this point it may be appropriate to refer back to the idea that one's culture has a great deal to do with the development of personality. It seems that by viewing culture as a cause of personality only half of the picture is seen. It is possible that personality has a lot to do with the development of culture. Yinger (1965) has stressed this in an examination of whether the sociocultural system effects individual action, whether individual action effects the sociocultural

system, or both. He calls for a more careful specification of causal relationships. In studies of culture and states that the relationship between cultural norms and personality is reciprocal. In other words, "individual responses to and interpretations of culture lead to normative variation" (1965:82). Thus, as part of the perpetuation process, a group may create cultural elements that are consistent with what its members actually do.

Going from these general principles to specific ethnic groups, the first step was to collect an inventory of family norms from the literature on each ethnic group. Second, these norms were divided into two broad levels. The criterion for differentiating between these two levels of norms is that some norms seem to be ones which determine the entire nature of a relationship while others deal with more specific actions which are consequences of that relationship and closer to the use of violence. For example, a basic norm in Mexican-American ethnic groups would be the dominance of old over young, while a more specific norm would be the severity of father-son relations.

The third step was to develop hypotheses concerning causal links between these family structure norms to specific norms for violence or non-violence. The final step was to find child rearing norms in the literature which seem to perpetuate each subculture.^{2/}

MEXICAN-AMERICANS

Figure 1 is a representation of the Mexican-American ethnic group as a subculture of family violence. This material on family norms used to construct this diagram comes primarily from Fernandez-Marina et al (1958), Peñaloma (1968), Lewis (1959), and Ramirez (1967).

Figure 1 about here

All of the basic family norms and values in figure 1 are concerned with the great amount of authority which the older male possesses in Mexican-American families. The fundamental incompatibility between a great deal of authority and intimacy suggests the hypothesis that the four basic family norms are related to severe father-son relations. Examples of severe father-son relations are the father seeing requests for assistance by children as an affront to his dignity, that deception of children is used by both parents when convenient, and that children are often severely punished for an offense such as lying (Peñalosa, 1968:685). In other words the father remains distant and emotionally aloof until the child does something wrong.

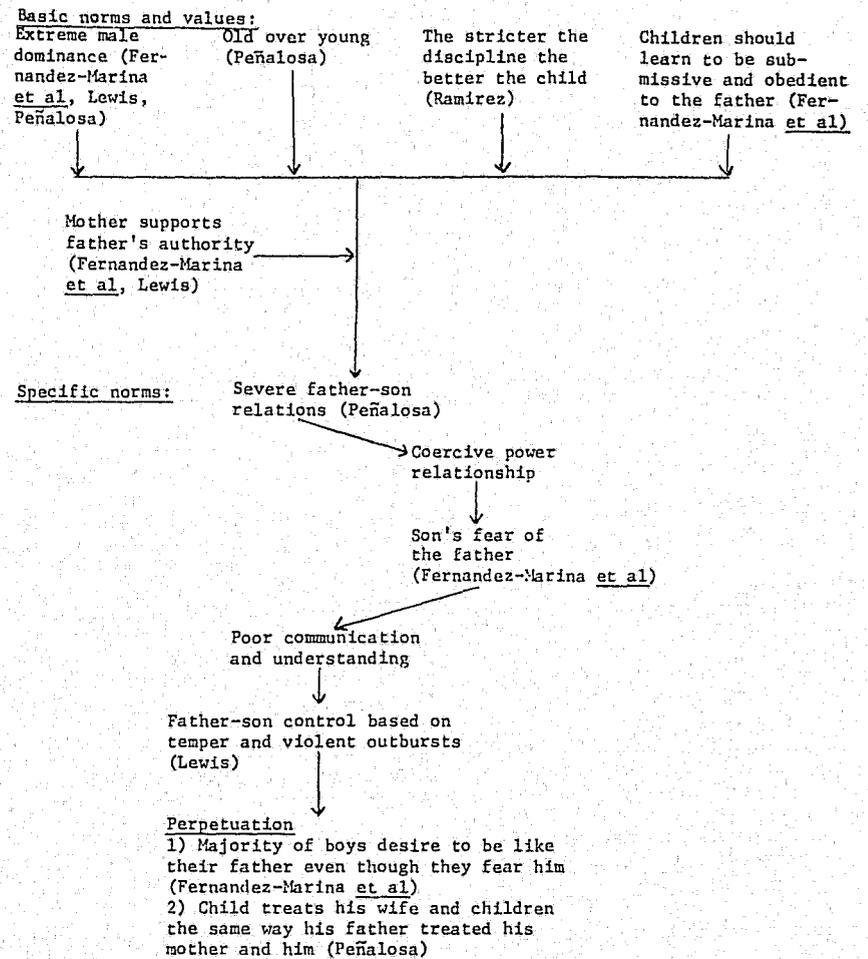
Implicit in the above paragraph is the following proposition relating any one of these basic family norms to a more specific one.

1. To the extent that the male possesses a great amount of authority in family life, the more will that culture be characterized by severe father-son relations.

An intervening variable in the relationship between the four basic norms and severe father-son relations is the degree to which the mother supports the father's authority. If she does support it, father-son relations are expected to be even more severe and the norms of extreme male dominance suggest that the mother is more likely to support her husband's authority.

The most important relationship in this cultural-consistency theory for Mexican-American families is that between the specific norm of severe father-son relations and the actual use of violence. Intervening in this chain is the fact that severe father-son relations lead to the son being afraid of his father. The son's fear contributes to the

Figure 1. Mexican-American parent-child violence.



father's control being based on his temper and violent outbursts.

How does the son's fear of the father lead to the use of temper and violent outbursts as a means of control? It would seem that the presence of fear in a relationship would inhibit the degree of communication between two parties. Possibly the distance and emotional aloofness between father and son indicates low "referent power" and therefore the need to use high "coercive power". Referent power refers to the degree to which one person's identification or oneness with another allows the latter person to influence the former (French and Raven, 1959:161). Coercive power is not based on attraction or identification but on the threat of punishment as a means by which one person influences another. (French and Raven, 1959:157). In other words the child conforms to the father's wishes not because he feels attracted or close to him but because the threat of force and the probability of punishment is high. The son's fear of this threat may impair his understanding of his father's desires relating to a certain matter. Not understanding may lead to his acting in a way which the father feels is wrong and may increase the chance that the father will lose his temper and act violently.

Four propositions linking severe father-son relations and the actual use of violence are implicitly in the above paragraph.

2. The more severe the father-son relations, the greater the coercive power which the father is willing to bring to bear on the son.
3. The greater the coercive power of the father with the threat of punishment, the greater the son's fear of the father.
4. To the extent that fear is present in a father-son relationship, the more difficult it will be for the fearful son to understand the desires of the father and the greater the chance that the son will not act according to his father's desires.
5. To the extent that the son does not act according to the father's desires and a coercive power relationship exists between father and son, the greater the chance that control will be based on temper and violent outbursts.

Using deductive logic, these four propositions can be merged to show the relationship between the norm of severe father-son relations and the actual use of violence as follows:

Combining 2 and 3

6. The more severe the father-son relationship, the greater the son's fear of the father.

Then combining the above with 4

7. The more severe the father-son relationship, the greater the chance that the son will not act according to the father's desires

Finally, combining 7 with 5, the link between the norm for violence and the actual use of violence is made.

8. The more severe the father-son relationship, the greater the chance that control will be based on the use of temper and violent outbursts.

The linking mechanism between the severity of father-son relations and the actual use of violence maybe analogues to Steinmetz' findings (1974) that a father's occupational environment effects the methods of control that he uses. Men who use skills requiring either physical strength or control (dentists, truck drivers, or executives) had higher physical punishment scores than those who relied on verbal skills (school teachers, accountants, social workers). Similarly Mexican-American fathers who have dominating relationships with their sons will use a great deal of verbal and physical coercion because this type of action reflects the father-son relationship.

Using deductive logic to combine propositions 1 and 8, it can be shown that cultural-consistency seems to play a part in explaining the amount of family violence among Mexican-American ethnic groups. Essentially this combination yields the following proposition.

9. To the extent that the male possesses a great amount of authority in family life, the greater the chance that control will be based on the use of temper (verbal) and violent outbursts (physical).

Thus, a norm related to family life in a subculture which has nothing directly to do with the use of violence, acts to increase the actual level of violence within that group. The method of linking propositions used above can be used to relate the other three family norms to the actual level of family violence.

Pernatuation of this pattern of violence is probably accomplished through social learning processes (Bandura, 1973). Owens and Straus (1975) for example show that the more violence experienced by a child, the greater the tendency to favor the use of violence as an adult. Apparently the child comes to believe that the best way to have his own children act obediently is to use physical force, even if he was afraid of it as a child. Yinger's statement that the individual personality has a great deal to do with the development of culture also applies here. If the child feels that the use of force is the best way of controlling other members of his family, cultural norms which may support this view are reinforced.

Most of the norms which were found for this ethnic group do not deal with husband-wife violence as such. However, the rigid norm of extreme male dominance (Peñalosa, 1968:683) could lead to severe husband-wife relations, fear of the husband, preference for verbal and physical means of control, and control being based on violent outburst by the husband. Thus, the rate of husband-wife violence is also expected to be high among Mexican-Americans.

JEWISH-AMERICANS

Jews have traditionally been characterized as being low in family violence. Most Jews would be considered at or above middle class today, and this might account for their low rates of family violence. However, not many decades ago when their ancestors were lower down the status ladder, they probably also had lower rates of family violence than other poor ethnic groups. Possibly Jewish family norms, have something to do with the low level of family violence.

Figure 2 about here

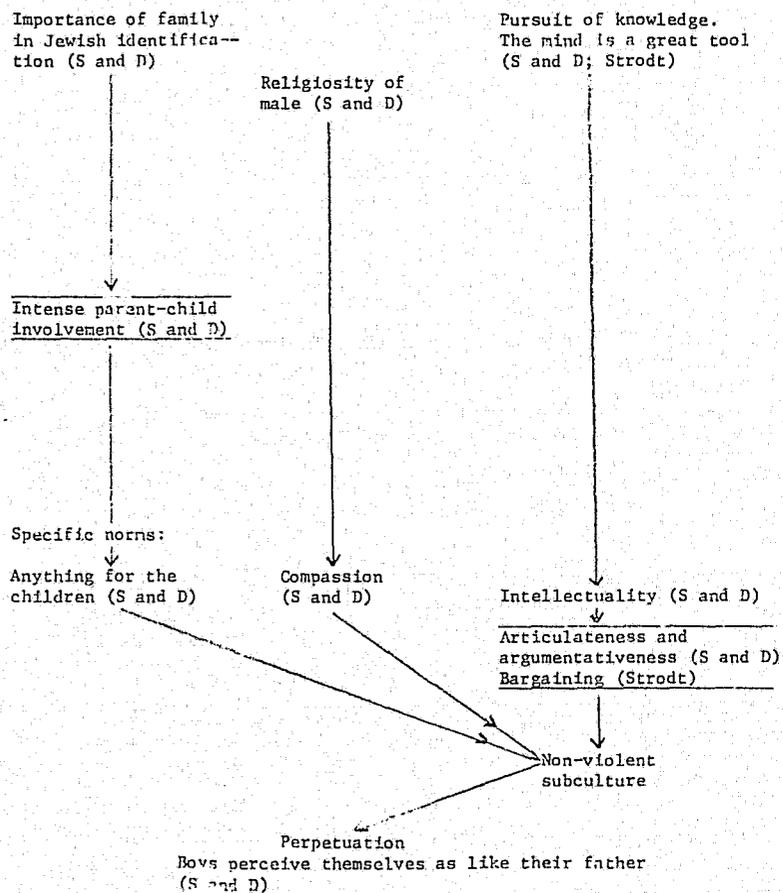
Figure 2 outlines a Jewish-American cultural-consistency theory of family violence. The two sources which were used to develop an inventory of norms were Shapiro and Dashefsky (1974) and Strodbeck (1958).

Both Shapiro and Dashefsky (1974) and Strodbeck (1958) mention the fact that there is a great deal of stress put on the pursuit of knowledge in Jewish culture. Emphasis on this norm could lead to a more specific norm of intellectuality, or rationality, which suggests less willingness to act violently when faced with a problem. Straus (1974) found that to the extent that couples engaged in rational problem solving (measured by discussing or trying to discuss an issue calmly, getting information to back up one's side of an argument, or bringing in someone else to settle things), there was a lower level of husband to wife or wife to husband physical violence. Thus, one who approaches a problem rationally would be more likely to at least try to reason out the problem and violence might be used more as a last resort, i.e.

1. To the extent that intellectuality is stressed, the emphasis will be on rational means of solving family problems, rather than on verbal or physical coercion.

Figure 2. Jewish-American subculture of family violence.

Basic norms and values:



based on
 S and D = Shapiro and Dashefsky, 1974
 Strodt = Strodtbeck, 1958

A function of intellectuality in Jewish families, which may be more closely related to non-violence, is the fact that norms for articulateness, argumentativeness, and parent-child bargaining are present. These three norms would seem to sanction conflict but channel it off into discussion rather than physical action. It's possible that frequent conflict may be a characteristic of Jewish families. If that is the case, the frequency of conflict may be a sign that Jewish families are very stable.

When close relationships are characterized by frequent conflicts rather than by the accumulation of hostile and ambivalent feelings, we may be justified, given that such conflicts are not likely to concern basic consensus, in taking these frequent conflicts as an index of the stability of these relationships (Coser, 1956:85).

The following proposition can be developed from the above discussion:

2. The greater the emphasis on articulateness, argumentativeness, and parent-child bargaining, the greater the chance that conflicts will be resolved through discussion rather than violent or coercive action.

Finally, the basis of a cultural-consistency analysis can be shown by combining propositions 1 and 2 to present one relationship between a basic family norm and the actual use of violent or non-violent action to resolve a conflict.

3. To the extent that the pursuit of knowledge is stressed, and debate and conflict are regarded as legitimate, the greater the chance that conflicts will be resolved through discussion rather than violent or coercive action.

In this paper an attempt has been made to construct a cultural-consistency theory of family violence based on the idea that general family norms and values having no manifest reference to violence act to either increase or hold down the actual level of family violence in a certain subculture. Norms were separated into two levels: basic family norms and specific. They were linked together, and the more specific norms were in turn linked to the actual use of violence in a subculture. Finally, norms which perpetuate the use of violence were examined.

Two ethnic groups, the Mexican-Americans and Jewish were used to apply this theory. For Mexican-Americans a high level of family violence was proposed. This was due especially to the norms of severe male dominance, strict discipline, and submission to the father. Severe father-son relations were seen to be the result of these norms, leading to fear of the father, poor communication and a resulting high level of parent-child violence. Husband-wife relations are proposed to also follow this pattern. Perpetuation of this subculture is accomplished through the desire for boys to be like their father even though they fear him and because a child treats his wife and children the same way his father treated his mother and him.

Norms of the Jewish ethnic group were also placed into this theoretical framework with the conclusion that there would be little family violence. The basic family norms emphasized were the pursuit of knowledge and the use of the mind rather than the body. The specific norm of intellectuality resulting from these general norms was proposed to lead to the favoring of articulateness, argumentativeness, and bargaining as a way to solve family disputes. Thus, debate and not verbal or physical coercion is used and there is less family violence. Perpetuation is

accomplished by the fact that boys perceive themselves as like their fathers.

One final point to be made here is that an examination of additional sources and the including of more norms may require that these two diagrams be altered. The seeking out of additional references and future development of a cultural-consistency theory of family violence should start here and not only expand on these two ethnic groups but other subcultural types as well.

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FOOTNOTES

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1. Mexican-American and Jewish ethnic groups were selected because they were groups which seemed to have norms which were markedly different from each other, allowing for two very different examinations of a cultural-consistency theory of family violence.

2. Another source of perpetuation could be feedback processes which occur in the proposed causal chain between broad family life norms not related to violence, specific norms of violence, and the actual use of violence. The use of violence to control a situation resulting in the label of violence might strengthen the norm of violence through a self-fulfilling prophecy. In fact, the perceived effectiveness of a norm of violence or non-violence might even strengthen the more basic norm from which the violent or non-violent norm has originated. In other words, if the norm of violence or non-violence is an effective means of control, then the way of life which sanctions this norm would also be adhered to strongly.

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