



Understanding Trauma through a Gender Lens

Introduction

The majority of youth involved with the juvenile justice system have experienced trauma throughout their lives (Brosky & Lally, 2004; Cauffman et al., 1998). In fact, traumatic events, such as child abuse and domestic violence, place youth at risk of delinquency (Herrera & McCloskey, 2001; Widom, 1995). Research consistently demonstrates a strong relationship between trauma and a host of problem behaviors, especially among girls (Chesney-Lind 1989; Simkins & Katz, 2004). In general, there are important gender differences related to the prevalence, impact, and treatment needs of boys and girls, which require gender-specific responses (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Dembo et al., 1992; McCabe et al., 2002). While there is an increasing recognition of the prominent role that trauma plays in the lives of justice system-involved youth, there remains a lack of trauma-related treatment and services to meet their needs and aid in their healing and recovery. Several interventions have recently been developed, though in order for services to be effective, trauma needs to be viewed and understood through a gender lens.

Overview

There are several types of trauma including interpersonal violence (sexual and physical abuse, and domestic violence) as well as witnessing interpersonal violence and victimization. In addition, serious accidents, natural disasters, war, terrorism, political violence, and the loss of a loved one can also be extremely traumatic. Although there are numerous events that can be traumatic to the individuals experiencing them, trauma that involves victimization is more strongly associated with negative physical, psychological and social outcomes (Ford et al., 2007). In fact, among children and adolescents, physical abuse, sexual abuse and witnessing domestic violence are more significantly related to PTSD, whereas exposure to accidents, natural disasters and witnessing or being a victim of a crime are less often associated with PTSD (Luthra et al., 2009). Research focusing on justice system-involved youth in California who met criteria for PTSD found that none reported recent natural disasters as traumatic events (Steiner et al. 1997). Instead, they reported interpersonal violence in the family including abuse and injury as sources of trauma. While all types of trauma should be assessed and treated, interpersonal violence and victimization can be particularly damaging and necessitate specialized care and attention.

Prevalence of Trauma among Justice System-Involved Youth

The prevalence of trauma among justice system-involved youth varies depending on the types of trauma and population under review, however, this delinquent youth generally report much higher rates of trauma and PTSD (Abram, 2004). To illustrate, justice system-involved youth

experience trauma at rates that are 8 times higher than community samples (Wolpaw & Ford, 2004). This is especially true for girls who report equal or higher rates of trauma and PTSD compared to even their male counterparts (Cauffman et al., 1998; Ford et al., 2007). Numerous studies show that over 70% of girls experience trauma in general and more frequently report sexual and physical abuse compared to boys (Brosky & Lally, 2004; Cauffman et al., 1998; Mueser & Taub, 2008). Sexual abuse has been strongly associated with PTSD and youth who report PTSD are more likely to run away and self-harm (Dixon et al., 2005; Mueser & Taub, 2008). Regarding specific traumatic events, 92% of the justice system-involved girls in California reported emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse (Acoca & Dedel, 1998). While both boys and girls report high rates of abuse, studies show that abuse is a stronger predictor of female delinquency (Makarios, 2007).

Gender Differences

There are important gender differences in the rates and impact of, as well as responses to trauma. Girls and boys experience different types of trauma at differing rates. For example, girls more often report sexual abuse, sexual assault, physical punishment and psychological distress compared to boys (Hennessey et al., 2004, Tolin & Foa, 2006). On the other hand, boys are more likely to experience non-sexual assaults, accidents, illness, injury and witnessing death or injury (Tolin & Foa, 2006). While justice system-involved girls and boys may both experience high (though differing) rates of trauma in general, more girls meet criteria for PTSD than boys (Abram et al., 2004).

The ways in which youth respond to trauma has important implications regarding how to best address their needs. While both boys and girls often respond to trauma with anger and dissociation, girls also more frequently experience depression and anxiety (Foster et al., 2004). Another important difference is that while boys have a stronger response when they are the victims of trauma compared to witnessing traumatic events, girls have similar psychological responses whether they witness or experience the trauma themselves (Foster et al., 2004). This suggests that girls may be more sensitive to witnessing trauma than boys. Although there is variation within gender, this knowledge of key gender differences in how youth experience and respond to trauma is crucial in helping professionals to identify and better understand possible sources and motivations for youth behaviors.

Re-traumatization

Unfortunately, many of the common practices that occur within juvenile justice facilities can further re-traumatize youth who have histories of victimization, violence and abuse. For example, physical confrontation, isolation and restraints can trigger youth who may have been subjected to similar practices in the past (Ford et al., 2007; Hennessey, 2004). Particularly damaging for girls are practices that involves forced disrobing, physical exams, body searches and being strapped to beds and/or restrained by male staff (Ford et al., 2007; Hennessey, 2004). Given a history of abuse, an environment which is unsafe, lacks privacy and is insensitive to trauma histories can increase risks of self-harm and suicide (Ford et al., 2007; Hennessey, 2004). Juvenile justice professionals need to be aware of how the environment and specific policies can re-traumatize both boys and girls and should avoid practices that are harmful and re-victimizing.

Interventions and Treatment

Since there has been a recent focus on trauma, several interventions aimed at treating youth in the justice system have been developed. Understanding trauma through a gender lens means that the ways in which gender influences development are taken into account. In addition, larger societal forces such as sexism, as well as racism, classism, and heterosexism, impact girls' lives in unique ways. Gender socialization predisposes boys and girls to both strengths and challenges in how they can heal and recover from trauma.

There are many developmental similarities during the stage of adolescence, but in general, girls focus more of their attention on relationships where mental health and substance use issues can stem from trauma and victimization (Bloom et al, 2005). Boys will often externalize pain and may find it more difficult to admit to having experienced trauma, which can serve to block healthy coping mechanisms (Briere & Scott, 2006). Therefore, interventions for girls should support self-determination and focus on empowerment and helping girl find and use their voices (Briere & Scott, 2006). They should also address the emotional aspects of trauma and ensure that girls reject notions that they may be responsible for abuse and victimization (Briere & Scott, 2006). Boys, most likely, will benefit from emotional and cognitive expression when they feel safe and do not fear being stigmatized (Briere & Scott, 2006). Additionally, interventions with boys should work to assure them regarding feelings of vulnerability related to admitting to trauma (Briere & Scott, 2006). Gender-specific interventions which incorporate this knowledge better serve both boys and girls.

Trauma-informed care (Covington & Bloom, 2003) outlines basic tenets which include (1) take the trauma into account; (2) avoid triggering trauma reactions and/or traumatizing the individual; (3) adjust the behavior of counselors, other staff, and the organization to support the individual's coping capacity (4) allow survivors to manage their trauma symptoms successfully so that they are able to access, retain, and benefit from the services (Harris & Falot, 2001). While it is essential to acknowledge trauma, it should not define youth. It is important to balance information about trauma with the reality that youth are active agents in their lives. Young people can be incredibly resilient and often develop survival skills and coping strategies, which are strengths that can be built upon in treatment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an understanding of trauma must be incorporated into programs and services for justice system-involved youth. Viewing trauma through a gender lens increases our awareness of how boys and girls differ in key areas related to trauma. In addition, a gender lens provides a framework which can help us meet the needs of youth who have suffered from traumatic events and ensure they are not further traumatized by programs designed to rehabilitate them. Finally, a gender lens enables us to see how socialization and social location present both strengths and challenges associated with trauma recovery and increases the likelihood that the goals of trauma treatment are met so all youth can heal and meet their fullest potential.

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