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Introduction of Motivation and Child Maltreatment: Volume 46 of the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation

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Introduction

David J. Hansen

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There are at least two great luxuries associated with being coordinator of the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation. One is choosing the topic or major theme of the prestigious and influential conference. The second is selecting the speakers. It is great to sit back and think about all of the leading scholars in the field and decide who you would like to hear speak and have contribute a chapter to the volume. This 46th Annual Nebraska Symposium on Motivation brought together a distinguished panel of scholars who explored issues related to motivation and child maltreatment.

Major societal concern over child abuse and neglect as a significant social problem began as recently as the 1950s and 1960s. The widespread prevalence of child maltreatment, and the numerous problems and consequences associated with it, have been increasingly recognized since then. The increased societal attention to child maltreatment is clearly evident in the research literature, which has grown tremendously since the 1970s. Given all of the recent scholarly attention, we have learned much to guide our understanding of the etiology, treatment, prevention, and consequences of child maltreatment. The Nebraska Symposium's emphasis on the concept of *motivation* provides a valuable perspective for consideration and integration of complex child maltreatment issues. The opportunity

provided by the symposium is particularly interesting and unique as "motivation" is not a term or concept that is commonly utilized in the child maltreatment literature.

The eminent panel of symposium scholars provided in their presentations, and the resultant chapters that follow, an informative and stimulating discussion of major perspectives, issues, research, future directions, and challenges in the field today. The speakers addressed a wide range of topics, from etiological perspectives and issues regarding the causes of maltreatment, to potential consequences and mechanisms of impact, to broad-based prevention models and programs, and finally to research strategies and obstacles in intensive intervention efforts with maltreating families.

The chapters appear in the order that the presentations occurred at the symposium. The volume opens with a chapter by Cathy Spatz Widom on perspectives for understanding motivation and possible mechanisms involved in the intergenerational transmission of violence—the phenomenon whereby abused and "victimized" children become perpetrators of violence when they grow up. Widom thoughtfully considers the empirical research on the "cycle of violence" and describes her prospective cohorts' design study with a large sample of abused and neglected children and matched controls who were followed into young adulthood. Theoretical perspectives for explaining motivation and mechanisms are described, and new analyses are presented that serve as an initial attempt to test some of these hypothesized mechanisms using data from the prospective cohorts study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of what has been learned to date and as well as directions for future research.

The examination of the intergenerational transmission of violence is followed by Joel Milner's chapter which examines specific individual (parental) factors that contribute to child abuse. Milner addresses how the abusive parent processes social information, particularly child-related information, and how this may contribute to the etiology of child physical abuse. His social information processing model is used to describe parental cognitive activities believed to mediate verbal and physical aggression against children. Possible relationships between personality factors, external stressors, and the components of information processing are described. Throughout the chapter, the limitations of the model and suggestions for testing and refining the model are presented. In addition, the chapter includes a

discussion of the implications of the model for assessment, treatment, and prevention.

From the social-cognitive processes of maltreating parents we proceed to an examination of the self-regulatory processes of maltreated children in the chapter by Dante Cicchetti and Sheree Toth. Issues and parameters for defining maltreatment are discussed. An ecological-transactional model is then presented and used to describe their research on the developmental processes and pathways that result in adaptive or maladaptive outcomes for maltreated children. Investigations of biological, psychological, and social-contextual regulatory processes in children who have experienced maltreatment are discussed to illustrate the mediating and moderating role these influences exert upon developmental outcome. In addition to presenting the extensive research from their laboratory, the authors consider the research of other investigators. Biological, psychological, and sociocultural systems are viewed as the prominent regulators of development. Cicchetti and Toth describe how adaptive or maladaptive development takes place in the dynamic transactions among the evolving capacities of the individual, his or her active self-organizing strivings for adaptation, and the internal and external regulatory context. Resilience is discussed to address the fact that some children exhibit positive adaptation in the face of adversity. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications for prevention and intervention as well as future research directions.

The initial chapters have many implications for prevention and intervention in child maltreatment. The next two chapters expand that focus with very specific looks at primary prevention models and programs and at conducting quality applied research on interventions with maltreating families.

In her chapter on child abuse prevention, Deborah Daro discusses the current directions and future challenges we face in our efforts to eliminate maltreatment. Daro describes a conceptual shift in "prevention imagery," away from a horizontal structure and toward a vertical one, with a strong foundation that offers a certain degree of universal screening and assessment. As an alternative to the approach of providing a plethora of separate prevention services, Daro emphasizes rooting all efforts in a common foundation of universal support which may develop and guide the diversified efforts in a more efficient and effective manner. The Healthy Families America program, including

ships that contribute to these representations; and (c) how changes in public policy, including new perspectives on child protection and family preservation, may reduce child maltreatment through prevention efforts and system reform. As Thompson notes, these issues are at the heart of contemporary research on child abuse and neglect.

Overall, the volume clearly communicates that although we have learned much in recent decades about the complexity, etiology, impact, prevention, and treatment of child maltreatment, there is much more to learn. The chapter authors have provided thoughtful commentary on the state of the field and the limits of our understanding and stimulating ideas for where to proceed.

Historical Note

The Nebraska Symposium has a long history focusing on motivation and related topics. Many of the most distinguished scholars in the field have participated over the years. In honor of the completion of the 25th Nebraska Symposium many years ago, Ludy Benjamin and Marshall Jones wrote of the history of the symposium and noted that *even then* the Nebraska Symposium was “the longest lived topical series in American psychology, with a national and international reputation” (Benjamin & Jones, 1979, p. ix).

At the time the Nebraska Symposium planning first began in the early 1950s there were only eight faculty in the Department of Psychology (compared to approximately 24 at present). A major concern for the graduate program was to be able to expose students to a wider variety of information, ideas, and orientations than could be accomplished by the small number of faculty. Thus, the idea of bringing in scholars for lengthy and informative visits developed. The original funding for the Nebraska Symposium for many years came from clinical training grants from the U.S. Public Health Service. These training grants were to provide support for the Clinical Psychology Training Program within the Department of Psychology, which in 1948 was among the first cohort of clinical programs ever to be accredited by the American Psychological Association (APA).

Clinical training grant funding for the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation continued from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s.¹ Thus, it was fitting that in conjunction with the 46th Annual Nebraska Symposium in 1998 we held a “Department of Psychology Cele-

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bration" in recognition of the 50th anniversary of APA accreditation of the Clinical Psychology Training Program. The celebration also acknowledged the renovation and reopening of Burnett Hall (the building that houses the Department of Psychology), and included tours, presentations, and workshops by faculty and alumni and the dedication of the Sarata Community Research Room as well as a tree and a bench in memory of Professor Brian Sarata. It culminated with a reception and dinner for many alumni, students, faculty, and friends of the program.

Acknowledgments

There are many people who contributed to this symposium and volume. Of course, the essential players were the invited speakers and authors: Dante Cicchetti, Sheree L. Toth, Debra Daro, John Lutzker, Joel Milner, and Cathy Spatz Widom. It was terrific to hear their presentations, discuss and read their work, and collaborate on this effort. I am also grateful to the discussant, my friend and colleague Ross Thompson, for his ongoing consultation and contributions throughout this experience. Dick Dienstbier, the series editor, was also a valuable resource.

Many current and former graduate students made a variety of contributions to the symposium and volume. Most notably, Deb Hecht and Georganna Sedlar helped from start to finish in *many* ways—from the early days of planning the symposium, to hosting and driving speakers, to help with final proofing of chapters, as well as many other chores throughout the effort. Others who contributed significantly include Mary Fran Flood, Kristine Futa, Becky Colman, and Jen Wyatt.

An enduring influence in making this and many other Nebraska Symposia on Motivation a success has been Claudia Price-Decker, who oversaw most aspects of the scheduling, advertising, and other arrangements. Other staff of the Department of Psychology also contributed significantly, including Becki Barnes, Jamie Longwell, and Norma Jean Green.

Finally, I gratefully acknowledge the help and support of my family. My wife, Mary Kay, and our children, Matt and Marie, contribute in many ways to all of my efforts including this symposium and volume. Thanks.

Note

1. As noted in the preface to this volume, the symposium is currently supported largely by funds donated in the memory of Professor Harry K. Wolfe to the University of Nebraska Foundation by the late Professor Cora L. Friedline.

Reference

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