Defining points and transformative turns in family violence, parenting and coparenting disputes

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Abstract

Family violence is a multifaceted issue encompassing various harmful behaviors within familial relationships. This paper explores the definitional problems presented in this special issue on family violence and its impact on parenting and coparenting. By examining the shifts and expansions of concepts related to family violence over time, we highlight the transformative turns in this special issue that have helped us to clarify our understanding of family violence. We explore the transformative expansions of family violence by situating this exploration within a "concept creep" analysis. We make a note of the underlying assumptions associated with these concepts. Through an analysis of concept creep, we elucidate how the expansions and redefinition of violence-related terms have influenced our understanding of family violence. By differentiating family violence, intimate partner violence, and maltreatment, we emphasize the necessity of unpacking these terms to avoid oversimplification or overlooking certain forms of violence that may go unnoticed under narrow definitions. The authors further highlight the need for interdisciplinary collaboration to address the complexities of family violence and its impact on parenting and coparenting. By acknowledging and responding to expansions of concepts in family violence, we can strive to protect and support children in these

challenging circumstances, ultimately promoting their well-being and creating safer family environments.

KEYWORDS

child safety, concept creep, coparenting, family law, family violence, parenting

Key points for the family court community

- Family violence is a hypernym for various forms of violence and abuse that can impact intimate relationships.
- Concept creep provides a framework for understanding family violence concepts' horizontal and vertical expansions over time and its impact on parenting and coparenting.
- Due to the complexity of family violence, a systematic approach must thoroughly screen, assess and intervene to ensure the safety and well-being of all family members.
- An ecological approach to family violence emphasizes the various interrelated levels that impact and influence the consequences of violence within families.

DEFINING FAMILY VIOLENCE

Family violence is a multifaceted and complex family law issue that occurs within the intimate spaces of households, impacting individuals of all ages and relationships. Family violence is any form of abuse, maltreatment, or neglect perpetrated towards another family member, including adults and children within the family system (Department of Justice Canada, 2022). Numerous conceptual frameworks have been developed to better understand family violence by focusing on the various types, causes, and frequency (Rossi et al., 2016). Violence and abuse can occur across multiple family relationships and contexts, including intimate partner violence (IPV), child maltreatment, elder abuse, and pet abuse (Department of Justice Canada, 2022). Violence and abuse within the family system can include physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and economic abuse. Numerous conceptual frameworks have been developed to better understand family violence by focusing on the various types, causes and frequency (Rossi et al., 2016). Differences in the context and consequences of violence can have implications for addressing safety issues within parenting plans (Drozd & Saini, 2019).

In this special issue on family violence, several definitions of violence have been proposed, focusing on intimate relationships or relationships between and among multiple family members. Nonomura et al. (in this issue) focus on legislative changes in Canada that have helped to reshape the definition of family violence to include any form of abuse within a family that provides for IPV and child abuse, including exposing children to IPV. Sullivan et al. (in this issue) define family violence as "an umbrella term" for the various kinds of violence within family dynamics, including IPV, child maltreatment and neglect, and behaviors that attempt to undermine the child's relationship with the other parent. Davis et al. (in this issue) emphasize that family violence is not limited to any specific demographic or socio-economic group and can occur across diverse family structures.

Several recent attempts have been made to expand the concept of violence to be more inclusive of diverse family dynamics. For example, scholars have emphasized that family violence can occur within the diversity of significant interpersonal relationships, including intact and separating husband and wife relationships, girlfriend and boyfriend dating relationships, gay, lesbian, transgender and non-binary partners, parents and children, and adult children and elderly parents (World Health Organization, 2002; Huss, 2009).

By defining violence, the APA Task Force on Violence and the Family focused on patterns of abusive behaviors (e.g., physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, economic) that are used to gain power over the other, maintain the misuse of power, and control the other (as cited by Rakovec-Felser, 2014). Hardesty et al. (this issue) emphasized behaviors in intimate relationships that cause physical, sexual, or psychological harm based on the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) but also noted the importance of distinguishing coercive controlling violence (CCV) from situational couple violence (SCV). Rossi et al. (this issue) relied on a definition by Breiding et al. (2017). This definition focuses on IPV and describes it as physical or sexual violence, stalking, psychological aggression, or coercion by a past or current intimate partner.

O'Leary (in this issue) suggests that no single agreed-upon classification system defines family violence. Rather than illustrate violence or abuse, Ponting et al. (in this issue) focus on the risk factors associated with the risk of violence. O'Leary (in this issue) focuses on the association between family violence and substance misuse. Davis et al. (in this issue) emphasize the role of judicial decision-making when family violence is a factor in determining parenting time and implications related to remote technologies.

In summary of the articles in this special issue, it can be postulated that the complexity of family violence arises from various factors, such as power imbalances, societal norms, cultural influences, and individual characteristics (Hardesty & Ogolsky, 2020), but, as Davies (in this issue) noted, the consequences of family violence extend beyond immediate harm, permeating the emotional well-being, relationships, and overall functioning of individuals and entire family systems, including, more specifically, the impact on parenting, coparenting, and child adjustment.

Ponting et al. (this issue) also point out that there remains little consensus regarding a universally accepted definition of children's exposure to IPV. Family law has moved from describing a "child witness of violence" (Aitken, 1998) to a "child exposed to violence" (Holden, 2003) to better reflect the different types of violence children experience beyond simply observing the violence. Holden (2003), for example, suggests other forms of exposure, including prenatal exposure, victimization, participation, eyewitness observation, overhearing, observation of the initial effects, experiencing the aftermath, and hearing about the violence. Ponting et al. (this issue) encourage the broad definition of children's exposure to IPV as the more inclusive approach. This broad definition of children's exposure to IPV is consistent with the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has recognized that children should be protected from harm and that they have a universal right to live free from all forms of violence (Convention on the rights of the child, 1989, Article 19).

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE AND LABELS IN PERCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE

Language and labels are crucial in shaping perceptions of violence and abuse within society (Wilcox, 2008). How we conceptualize, describe, and label acts of violence and abuse influences how we perceive and respond to them. Language reflects societal attitudes and values and has the power to shape and reinforce those attitudes (Rakovec-Felser, 2014). The use of language can either normalize or condemn specific acts of violence and patterns of abuse. Descriptive and accurate language of violence and abuse can convey the gravity and harm of these violent acts, bring awareness to acts of violence, and foster a sense of urgency for addressing the issue. In contrast, euphemistic or dismissive language related to violence can downplay the severity of an act of violence and deny harm's impact on individuals (Walker et al., 2021).

Labels attached to different forms of violence and abuse impact how we understand and respond to perceptions of harm. Specific labels, such as domestic abuse, IPV, or child maltreatment, not only categorize and differentiate

various types of violence but also highlight the particular dynamics and contexts in which they occur (Walker, 1999). Language and labels also influence perceptions of "victims" and "perpetrators" (Wilcox, 2008). The terms used to describe individuals involved in violent incidents can shape societal attitudes towards them. Victim-blaming language, for example, can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and shift the focus onto the victim (Clark, 2021), hindering support and empathy towards victims and contributing to the underreporting of violence (Heckert & Gondolf, 2000).

MOVING TOWARDS INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDELINES REGARDING FAMILY VIOLENCE

In 2021, the American Psychological Association (APA) issued *Inclusive Language Guidelines* to be used in conjunction with the *American Psychological Association Publication Manual, 7th edition* (2020). The Guidelines were developed to further equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) by using language that fosters inclusivity, respect, and safety in all environments (American Psychological Association, 2021). The Guidelines focus on marginalizing and harmful words and person-first versus identity-first language, emphasizing the person's choice of defining their identity rather than allowing others to define the person by their chosen label.

Consistent with these Guidelines and wanting to raise awareness of the possibilities for change and address marginalization and stereotypes that accompany experiences such as family violence, we asked the authors of the papers in this Special Issue to use inclusive language consistent with these guidelines. Specifically, we asked them to avoid terms such as victim and perpetrator, instead using a person who experienced or has been impacted by violence and who uses violence. Through these language changes, we could also focus on the actual impact of family violence on factors such as parenting, coparenting and child adjustment, as well as evidence-informed interventions that take into consideration an ecological perspective and the ripples of effect from the individual to the family system to the community.

CONCEPT CREEP: EXPLORING SHIFTING DEFINITIONS

Language and labels are not static. They evolve as societal attitudes change and knowledge grows (Rakovec-Felser, 2014). As our understanding of violence and abuse expands, the language and labels must reflect these advancements. Regular evaluation and terminology revision are necessary to ensure they accurately represent changing societal trends. For example, cyber abuse, cyber harassment, and cyber stalking are recent expansions of the concepts of violence to address the virtual interactions among family members and the increased dependence on technology for communication and social connection. Another example is the concept of cyberbullying, which was expanded from the idea of bullying (Mishna et al., 2012).

While these expansions of harm can be considered both normal and positive evolution of concepts based on changing societies, we must also be mindful of the potential negative impact of increasing notions of harm. The term concept creep was first described by Haslam (2016) in psychology as a framework for understanding the growing expansion of harm-related terms (e.g., the inclusion of cyber abuse as an expansion of the concept of violence and abuse). Haslam et al. (2020) suggested that while expanding concepts of harm can identify new forms of harm previously unrecognized, broadening definitions also have the danger of diluting or even changing the meaning of original concepts. Concept creep has helped shed light on previously overlooked forms of violence within families (e.g., emotional harm, cyber abuse, legal abuse), drawing attention to how individuals can experience harm within intimate relationships. Recent conceptual frameworks have isolated, for example, coercive and controlling dynamics to safeguard against these most devastating forms of violence. Hardesty noted (this issue) that different forms of violence and abuse would likely require different interventions to address the unique factors of the various forms of violence and abuse.

The Wingspread conference (Ver Steegh & Dalton, 2008) provided the opportunity to consider the expanding forms of violence and abuse that impact families in the context of family law (Jaffe et al., 2008). It helped to bring attention to these expansions by situating them within a classification schema that includes the different forms of violence and abuse, including Coercive Controlling Violence, Violent Resistant, Situational Couple Violence, and Separation-Instigated Violence (Jaffe et al., 2008; Kelly & Johnson, 2008).

Austin and Drozd (2012) created an integrated conceptual framework for the expansion of violence and abuse concepts in the context of parenting plan disputes, in which they urged parenting plan evaluators to approach assessment using a systematic method for considering the following:

1. Risk factors (e.g., history of previous violence, substance misuse, major mental disorders, and threat assessment factors).
2. Kind of aggression (e.g., physical, emotional/psychological, and coercive control).
3. Pattern, frequency, severity, and the nature of the child's exposure.
4. Pattern of instigation (e.g., primarily male, primarily female, mutual, defensive or reactive, involving multiple instigators).

By focusing on the expansions of concepts on a continuum, the Austin and Drozd (2012) conceptualization emphasizes the value of considering violence-related factors by assessing violence's patterns, frequency, and severity instead of focusing just on categories. This approach facilitates a comprehensive assessment of violence and abuse that integrates the fit between the unique experience of each family member and the effect of family violence more broadly on the children, parenting, and coparenting. Connecting assessment plans to parenting plans is essential, given the little attention in the social science research that connects the various forms, patterns, and contexts of violence to preferred parenting plans for optimal safety and well-being among family members.

As our understanding of the risks, consequences, and impacts of violence and abuse has evolved, new terms and concepts have been added to include the expansion of harm. As mentioned above, violence and abuse have expanded to include cyber abuse within a family or intimate partner relationship. Cyber abuse typically involves using digital technology, such as smartphones, social media, email, or other online platforms, to harass, threaten, control, or intimidate a family member or intimate partner. This type of abuse can take various forms, including sending threatening or derogatory messages through text, email, or social media to a family member or partner; using technology to track the victim's online activity, location, or movements without their consent; sharing explicit or intimate images or videos of a family member or partner without their permission, often with the intent to humiliate or harm them; manipulating or controlling a partner's online presence, such as forcing them to share passwords or monitoring their online interactions; engaging in cyberbullying behavior within a family context, where one family member bullies or harasses another using digital means; pretending to be the victim online and posting false information or making false statements to harm their reputation or relationships; or using technology to isolate the victim from friends and family by controlling their access to social media or communication platforms (Al-Alosi, 2017). Cyber abuse can have severe emotional, psychological, and even physical consequences for the victim, violating their privacy and personal boundaries (Woodstock et al., 2000).

Hardesty (this issue) also highlights the recent trend towards expanding the concept of coercive control to include "legal abuse" as a form of violence that intentionally misuses the court processes to continue to control former partners (Gutowski & Goodman, 2023). Hardesty (this issue) suggests that examples of legal abuse can include prolonging litigation with frivolous motions, forcing in-person contact at court, seeking full custody to retain control, making false allegations of abuse to gain an advantage in a legal dispute and portraying a parent as unfit or hostile to gain a tactical advantage in the court. Legal abuse can have significant emotional, psychological, and financial consequences for those impacted by violence.

Another example of the suggested expansion of violence is found in the paper by Sullivan et al. (this issue), in which they seek to include severe parental alienating behaviors (PABs) as a form of family violence. While highly

controversial, the authors make a compelling argument for expanding concepts of violence to include the most severe behaviors that could potentially cause harm to the child, including cognitive processing, physical health, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships. While the authors limited their focus to severe PABs, there is the risk that others will expand the definition of family violence to include all PABs, thus diluting the severity of other violent acts (e.g., IPV) or blurring the boundaries between different types of harm (Haslam, 2016). Not all behaviors identified within the grouping of PABs would be considered violent. For example, while there tends to be general support in the literature that denigrating a parent is psychologically harmful (Hibbard et al., 2012), not all of Baker and Fine (2013) documented 17 parental alienating behaviors would fit within current definitions of violence and/or abuse. For example, asking the child to refer to a step-parent as "mom" or "dad" may not be optimal or even appropriate, but it would be semantic inflation to suggest that this is abusive. Baker and Fine (2013) explained that "taken together, the 17 parental alienation strategies work to create psychological distance between the child and the targeted parent such that the relationship becomes conflict-ridden" (p. 94), and these form the concept of PABs.

The broadening of violence to include PABs has the potential to inflate the occurrence of parent–child contact problems, making it more challenging to effectively assess, identify, and address specific forms of violence. One of the risks of including PABs under the family violence umbrella is that doing that may be and is likely to be used as a weapon in the all-or-nothing war between abuse and alienation, as those on the extremes use words to weaponize their arguments that further divide us. It may also lead to variations in interpretations and inconsistencies in applying interventions and legal responses. Including PABs also has the risk of treating all forms of violence as the same, diminishing the impact of IPV or child maltreatment when the types, patterns, severity, frequency, and impact on the child's development and functioning of the PABs are not considered. Moreover, given the current adverse political climate between extreme advocates and the false binary causal pathways of parental alienation or intimate partner violence on PCCP, and semantic inflation of PABs as a form of family violence may thus result in the definition being intentionally, even maliciously, exploited in courtrooms and legislatures, potentially causing even greater harm and confusion among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.

To navigate the potential risks of concept creep, it will be necessary for family law professionals to carefully screen for the types and patterns of behaviors that could be harmful and to be clear on the use of terms so as not to inflate harm or to silence the importance of safety and protection from harm.

With all these new and emerging trends towards expanding concepts of violence and abuse, it is essential to balance inclusiveness and clarity. Continual dialogue, research, and refinement of definitions are necessary to ensure that the expanded understanding of violence and abuse remains grounded in empirical evidence, cultural context, and the experiences of those affected. Exploring shifting definitions due to concept creep enables us to better understand the complexity of violence within family settings. It prompts us to critically examine the evolving nature of violence and its manifestations, encouraging a comprehensive approach to addressing and preventing violence in all its forms.

TOWARDS DEFINITIONAL CLARITY: CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

Defining violence and abuse presents challenges due to the overlapping categories and blurred boundaries between different forms of violence. Often, acts of violence and patterns of abuse do not neatly fit into a single category, making it challenging to capture the full complexity of abusive behaviors (Drozd & Saini, 2019).

Addressing the overlapping categories and blurred boundaries within family violence is essential in navigating the challenges of definitional clarity. Hardesty (in this issue) points out that most of the literature fails to carefully distinguish types of family violence in favor of a broad definition of violence. They suggest that each form of violence and abuse should be carefully considered, given that various forms of violence and abuse can be harmful, even if they are understood differently within the context of these forms of violence. Rossi et al. (in this issue) affirm that it is critical that separating or divorcing parents be assessed for a history of family violence and ongoing safety concerns.

To achieve definitional clarity, it is crucial to consider the importance of contextual understanding and intersectionality (Cardena, 2023). Crenshaw (1989) coined the approach to understanding family violence by recognizing structural sources of inequality as intersectionality. This approach poses that people's identities (i.e., race, class, sex, and gender) interact with systems of oppression to create unique experiences (Collins, 1998). As a result, researchers recognized the overlapping oppressions individuals of diverse backgrounds face and their impact on their IPV experiences (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Family violence occurs within a social and cultural context, shaped by various factors such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. These intersecting identities influence the experiences of people who experience violence and those who use violence. A comprehensive understanding of family violence requires acknowledging these intersecting factors and recognizing that the manifestations and impacts of violence can differ based on an individual's unique circumstances.

Expanding definitions of family violence can have significant consequences, including underestimating and overestimating the prevalence and impact of family violence in individual cases and inadequate responses from the family law system. For example, scholars have criticized family law professionals (e.g., judges, mediators, parenting plan evaluators) for their lack of awareness and sensitivity to family violence issues, their overall lack of competency to detect family violence, and the limited use of procedures to screen for the potential presence of family violence (Ellis & Stuckless, 2006; Frederick, 2008; Hardesty et al., 2012; Ver Steegh et al., 2008). Rossi et al. (in this issue) note the consequence of practitioners lacking sufficient education on conducting family violence screening assessments, being able to interpret the results (Frederick, 2008; Saunders et al., 2011), and deciding which IPV tools to use in their practice. Given evolving concepts of violence and abuse, family law practitioners who are not receiving sufficient education about the expanding ideas of violence can provide their clients with outdated information.

Family law practitioners have also been criticized for not fully understanding and assessing the consequences of children's exposure to family violence when suggesting parenting plans to the courts (Jaffe et al., 2003; Rossi et al., this issue; Saini et al., 2019). Saini et al. (2013) found that the other parent made almost a third of family violence allegations reported to child protection services within parenting plan disputes. However, only a minority of these allegations were considered maliciously fabricated. Therefore, family law practitioners should avoid quick judgments about the complexity of these cases and not assume allegations are false. Similarly, it is essential for family law practitioners not to assume that allegations are true simply because they are reported (Drozd & Saini, 2019). Thus, family law practitioners should check any biases and collect, analyze, and synthesize data systematically and methodologically (AFCC, 2016; Rossi et al., this issue).

Section three of the AFCC IPV Guidelines (2016) suggests that a parenting plan evaluator should have in-depth knowledge of family violence's nature, dynamics, and impact. The guidelines state, "Because intimate partner violence frequently occurs in custody-litigating families and because it may be unidentified and difficult to detect, a custody evaluator will inevitably be involved in cases where intimate partner violence is or becomes an issue" (AFCC, 2016, p. 6). If an evaluator lacks knowledge in any area, the evaluator should seek relevant training, supervision, or professional consultation. We argue that all family law practitioners should receive adequate training and support to best work with the complexity of family violence. With changing and expanding definitions of violence and abuse, even those who were/are well trained might not be for long as the definitions and politics related to them are fluid. Moreover, simply using the term IPV or family violence without defining the nature, the context, and the implications fails to bring sufficient clarity required for labeling diverse forms of violence and abuse.

USING A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

In 2016, the AFCC collaborated with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and, in consultation with the Battered Women's Justice Project (BWJP), to develop Guidelines for Examining Intimate Partner Violence for parenting plan evaluators, aiming to identify better the risk of family violence and its potential effects on children, parenting, and coparenting. While these guidelines were developed specifically for parenting plan evaluators, they promote a systematic approach relevant to all family law practitioners.

The Guidelines (2016) advocate for a systematic approach to evaluating family violence allegations in the context of family law disputes, considering each family's unique circumstances. It emphasizes the importance of approaching each case without preconceived biases about the impact of violence on children and parenting. The Guidelines suggest that family violence be independently analyzed, separate from other issues like mental health or substance abuse, focusing on its context and implications for safety, parenting, coparenting, and child well-being.

Adhering to this systematic approach has several benefits. It enhances the quality and accountability of the screening process, making the assessment of family violence more valuable to the parties involved and the court (Austin & Drozd, 2012; Drozd & Saini, 2019). It also prevents the imposition of the family law practitioner's assumptions, biases, or beliefs. Additionally, employing this approach can highlight any misapplication of dominant cultural norms related to family violence. The systematic approach also provides a framework to identify expanding forms of violence and abuse and clarify how these concepts apply to individual cases.

APPLYING THE ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Adhering to this systematic approach also fits with the ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The ecological framework highlights the interaction between human characteristics, personal development, and the environments in which individuals find themselves. Belsky (1980) and Cicchetti and Rizley (1981) expanded the ecological framework including four interconnected parts: macrosystem (culture), ecosystem (community), microsystem (family), and ontogenetic development (individual) (Belsky, 1980). By considering the multiple levels of influence within the ecological framework, including individual, relationship, community, and societal factors, evaluators can better understand the dynamics and complexities of family violence for a specific family (See Figure 1).

Identifying the ecology of violence and abuse can also assist in clarifying expanding concepts of harm by considering the interconnected parts and their interactions to investigate the etiology of violence and abuse, its influences, and the various factors that may be related to the presence of harm. The ecology of violence framework further assists in avoiding premature closure of a singular label or violence but instead urges for a systematic and comprehensive assessment of the various interactions that impact the severity, frequency, nature, and type of violence or abuse.

Applying the ecological framework in parenting plan disputes involves a comprehensive assessment and identification of family violence within the ecological context. Through a systematic approach, we can uncover the multifaceted factors that influence parenting behaviors and outcomes in the context of family violence.

Ontogenetic development (individual-level factors)

At the individual level, parental attributes, mental health, and substance misuse issues can all play a significant role in parenting plan outcomes in family violence cases. Research suggests that parents with a history of using violence against their family members tend to exhibit higher levels of anger or aggression, are more likely to struggle with mental health issues, and have higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (Karakurt et al., 2019). O'Leary (this issue) points to the high correlation between alcohol misuse and IPV, highlighting the consequences of substance misuse, such as alcohol or drug addiction, and the impact of substance misuse and IPV on parenting and child maltreatment.

Microsystem (relationship-level factors)

Co-parenting dynamics and parental conflict are important relationship-level factors influencing parenting plan outcomes in family violence cases (Hardesty, this issue). As Hardesty (this issue) noted, high coercive control or power imbalances can significantly impact coparenting dynamics. Protective factors, willingness to engage in therapeutic
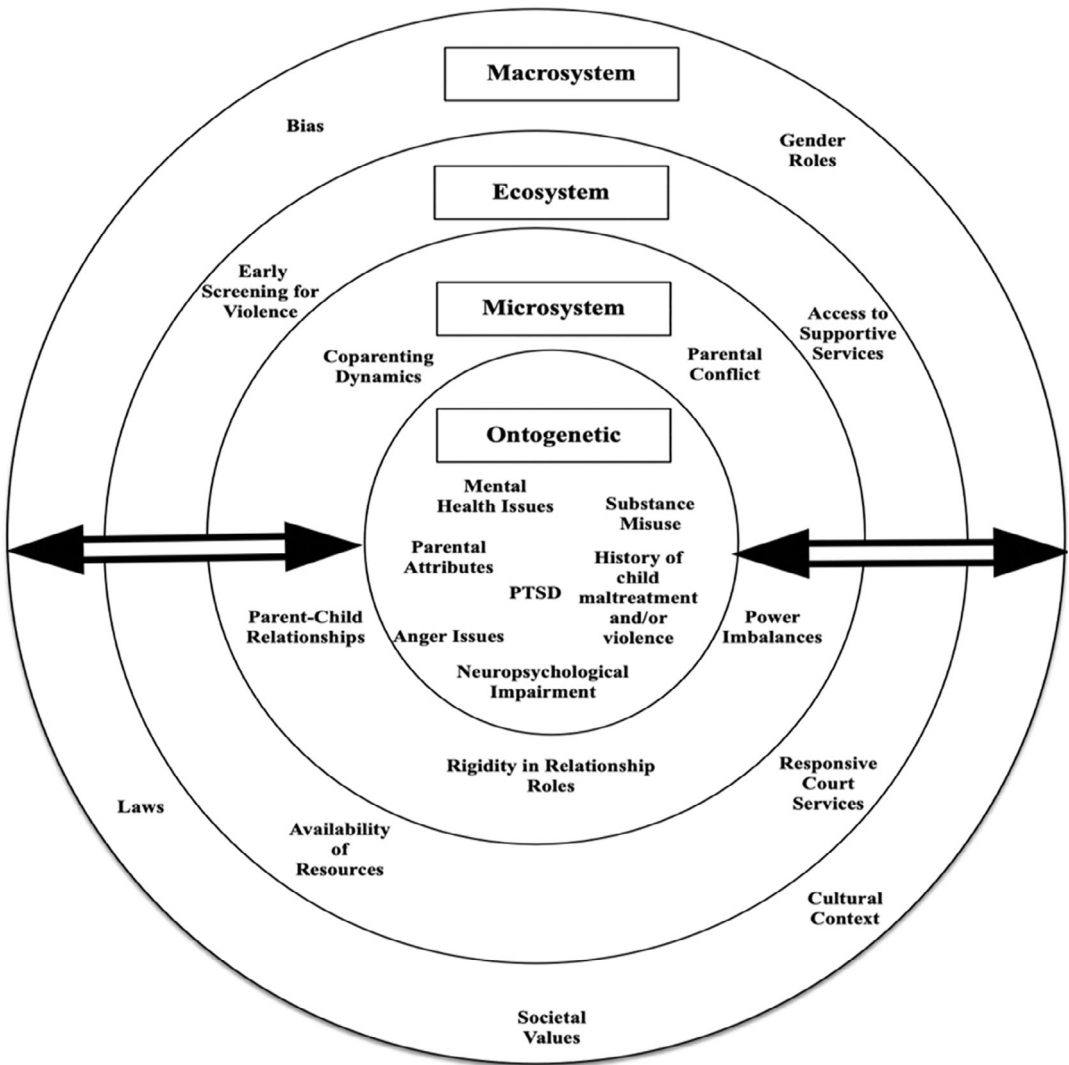
FIGURE 1   The ecology of family violence.

interventions, and demonstrated ability to prioritize the child's well-being can positively influence parenting plan outcomes. Ponting et al. (this issue) have described the potentially devastating consequences of exposure to IPV for young children, affecting the young child's neurological, relational, behavioral and physiological systems.

Exosystem (community-level factors)

Community-level factors, including the availability of resources and support services, also play a role in parenting plan outcomes in family violence cases (Davis et al., this issue). The adequacy of community resources such as shelters, counseling services, and supervised visitation programs, can impact the safety and well-being of parents and children affected by family violence. Davis et al. and Nomura et al. (this issue) describe the efficacy of anti-violence programs for fathers. Fathers can engage in these programs proactively or reactively, focusing on the safety of the mothers and their children and taking accountability through the courts.

Macrosystem (societal-level factors)

The macrosystem refers to societal factors that influence and contribute to family violence. These factors are broad and encompass the cultural, social, economic, legal and political influences within society that can either perpetuate or mitigate family violence, including societal norms and beliefs about gender roles, power dynamics, the responsiveness of the justice system, and the broader political and cultural climate. Davis and Crain (this issue) describe identity abuse in the LGBTQ+ populations as coercive control, capitalizing on societal attitudes towards these communities.

Understanding these factors at various levels within the ecological framework is crucial for professionals involved in parenting plan cases impacted by family violence. It allows for a comprehensive assessment of the complex dynamics at play and informs decision-making processes to ensure the safety and well-being of children in these challenging situations.

CONCLUSION

Exploring the various frameworks and models for understanding family violence has been a valuable exercise for this special issue on family violence and its effects on children, parenting, and co-parenting issues. This process has provided insights into the various dynamics, impacts, and risk factors associated with violence within family settings. This special issue has also offered the opportunity to critically examine the strengths and limitations of the proposed models, approaches, and interventions. Advancing definitional clarity is crucial for addressing the complexities of family violence. Family law practitioners must critically evaluate and redefine existing definitions and frameworks to ensure they capture the breadth of harmful behaviors. This includes recognizing emerging forms of violence, adapting to changes in societal dynamics, and accounting for the unique experiences of marginalized populations.

Definitional clarity should be accompanied by ongoing dialogue and collaboration among family law practitioners and researchers to ensure that definitions are meaningful, relevant, and inclusive. We can enhance our understanding of family violence by critically examining existing frameworks and models, integrating multiple perspectives, and advancing definitional clarity. This approach allows us to address the limitations of current approaches, consider the intersecting factors that contribute to violence, and develop more effective strategies for prevention, intervention, and support. Ultimately, striving for a comprehensive understanding of family violence is crucial for creating safer parenting plans for the parents and children involved in these family law disputes.

Differentiating family violence at the individual level of analysis

By recognizing the need to differentiate and address different types of violence, particularly within the context of parenting, family law practitioners can better promote safety, protection, and healthy parenting practices for the specific individuals involved.

Enhancing training and education for family law professionals

To effectively address family violence in the context of family law disputes, there is a need to enhance the training and education of family law professionals. Providing comprehensive and ongoing training on the dynamics of family violence, the impact of macrosystem variables on the availability of resources for identification and interventions, trauma-informed practices, and the impact on children, including the impact of parent–child contact problems, as well as the effect of family violence on parenting and coparenting can better equip professionals to recognize and respond to these complex cases.

Embracing interdisciplinary perspectives

Family law practitioners (judges, lawyers, mediators, parenting plan evaluators, parenting coordinators, court-involved therapists, etc.) must work together to advance our knowledge of family violence and develop a comprehensive framework for addressing family violence in the family courts. This includes embracing interdisciplinary perspectives, engaging in ongoing dialogue, and prioritizing the safety and empowerment of family members.

Consider evidence-informed approaches for addressing family violence

Addressing family violence requires a comprehensive and evidence-informed approach considering the complex interplay of individual, family and societal factors. Several strategies and approaches have been suggested in this special issue, including the development of resources and tools to address the use of technology for harassment, stalking, and abuse and to enhance digital safety for people who have experienced violence (Davis et al., this issue), the inclusion of screening (Rossi et al., this issue), early intervention (Ponting et al., this issue) and novel treatment approaches to end the escalation of violence (Scott et al., this issue).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

Navigating labels and achieving definitional clarity is essential to understand family violence comprehensively. Through this understanding, we can promote prevention, support survivors and work towards a society free from violence. By recognizing the complexity of violence within family settings and taking action to address it, we can strive towards building safer and more nurturing environments for individuals and families.

Legal interventions are crucial in creating a safe environment for families experiencing various forms of family violence. This may involve implementing protective orders, restraining orders, or parenting plans that prioritize the safety and well-being of the affected individuals, particularly children (Hardesty et al., this issue).

Clinical interventions are equally important in promoting healing and building resilience within the family system (Greenberg et al., 2019). Clinical interventions can provide a supportive and empowering space for individuals affected by family violence to process their experiences, develop coping mechanisms, and strengthen their resilience (Scott et al., this issue).

A collaborative approach between legal and clinical professionals is vital to ensure a comprehensive and coordinated response to family violence in the context of family law disputes. By working together, family law professionals can share information, expertise and resources to develop integrated interventions that address family violence's legal, emotional, and psychological dimensions within a systematic approach that embraces the complete ecology of family violence.

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