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Supporting the residential child care workforce through experiences of violence

Learning from *Violence in Residential Child Care: A Review of a Symposium on Practitioner Experiences*

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Introduction

Why hold a symposium?

A symposium is a gathering of peers where they can engage in deep discussion about a specific topic.

"If you go to the margins to make a difference, then it's about you, and it can't be, but if you go to the margins to be made different by the people there, then it's about us, and it's exquisitely mutual."

- Father Greg Boyle, Homeboy Industries

CONCERNS ABOUT RESTRAINT

- To develop a more nuanced understanding of restraint and its meaning for children and staff

ENGAGE WITH COMPLEXITY

- To consider violence as a phenomenon and reconcile personal and professional experiences of violence

PRESENCE OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

- To recognise that workplace violence exists for RCC workers, and that such experiences and their impacts need to be acknowledged

RESEARCH

Impact of workplace violence

- Acceptance of violence as “part of the job”
- Low mood, anxiety, or irritability
- Minor or major physical harm
- Fear for personal safety and private life
- Shame or withdrawal
- Prolonged absences or leaving work altogether

Munobwa et al. (2023). Swedish personal social service workers’ cognitive appraisals of encounters with violent clients. *Nordic Social Work Research, 13*(2).

Peddie et al. (2025). Health and social care professionals’ experience of psychological safety. *Nursing Reports, 15*(4).

Violence as a subjective experience

The discussion moved away from an either / or choice.



Staff

Shouting, pushing, hitting, & property damage can be experienced as violence.

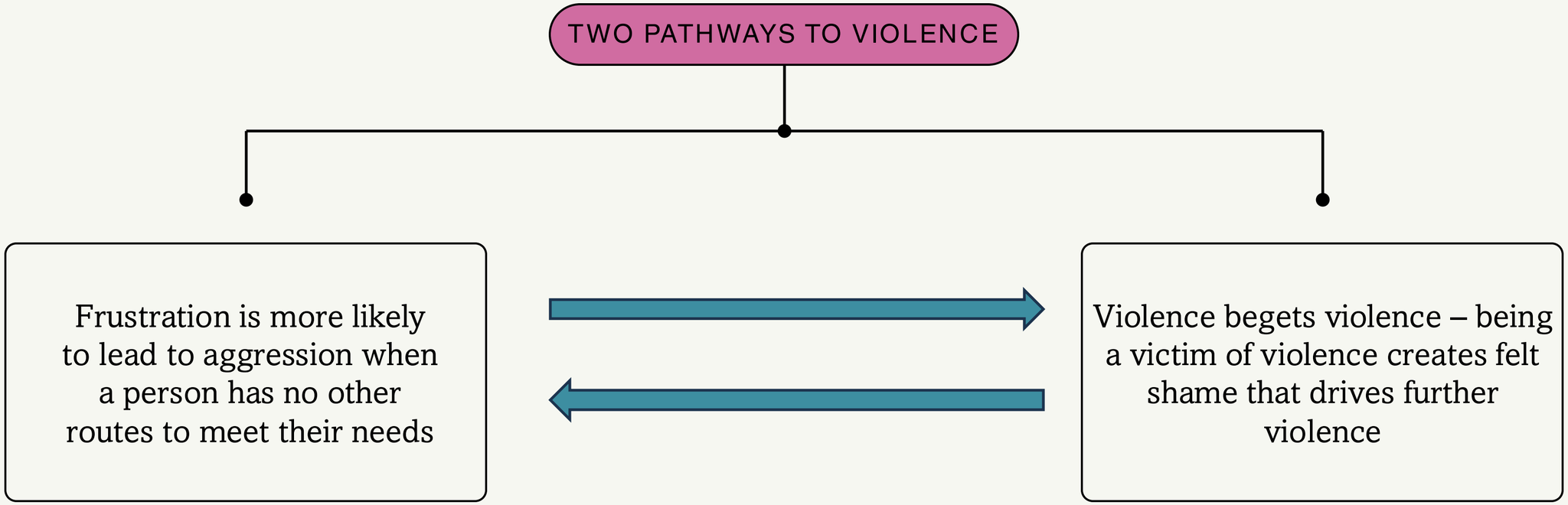
This can result in alarm, loss of dignity, and moral injury.

Children

Children may experience **restraint as violence.**

This has implications for how workers reflect on experiences of having to restrain children.

Role of significance and shame



"I'm scared of a five-year-old boy, how ridiculous is that?"

"It just happened so quickly and I couldn't do anything about it."

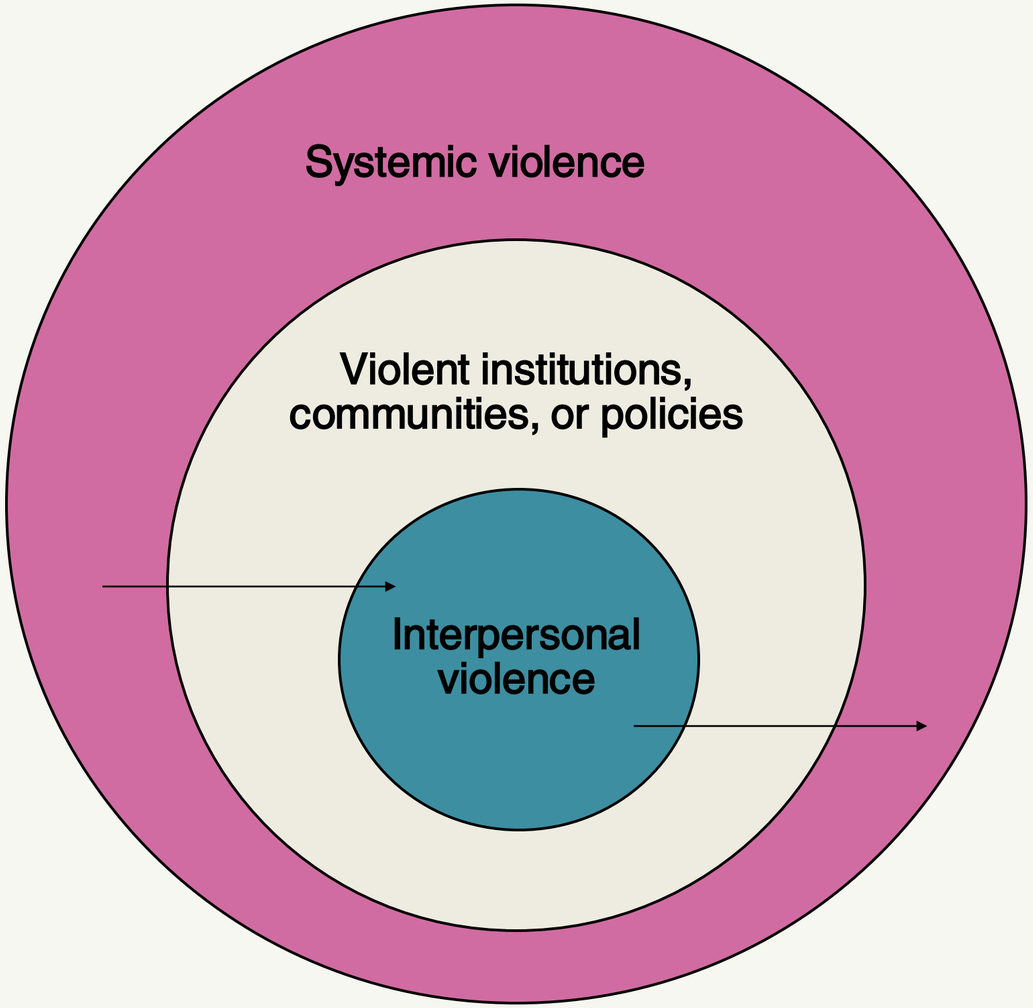
Kruglanski et al. (2023). Frustration-aggression hypothesis reconsidered: The role of significance quest. *Aggressive Behaviour, 49*(5).

Gerodimos, R. (2022). Breaking the cycle of shame and violence: From the individual to the Global.

Violence as a multi-level inequality

Hearn et al.'s (2022) theory of a "violence regime" positions **violence as an inequality in and of itself,** rather than solely a byproduct of other inequalities.

It takes a broad view of violence, acknowledging that more than 1-on-1 physical harm can constitute violence.



Hearn et al. (2022). Violence regimes: A useful concept for social politics, social analysis, and social theory. *Theory and Society, 51.*

THEME 4

Integrating personal & professional identities

IMPACT OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Personal experiences and conceptions of violence, including from early life, influence how violence is coped with in a professional setting.

Awareness of the influence of personal experience and automatic responses helps workers act more intentionally.

BALANCING PROFESSIONALISM & CARE

RCC presents unique tensions between being in a professional capacity and providing a familial-type relationship to children.

Some experience dissonance between how they view violence in the "outside world" versus in their jobs.

HUMAN CAPACITY FOR VIOLENCE

Participants grappled with humans' innate capacity for violence, and the realisation that they themselves are capable of violence.

Participants considered well-known cases of young people who committed violence and how they could have looked after those children.

Participant Vision Map

A GOOD EXPERIENCE OF LIVING AND WORKING IN RCC

- A noticeable reduction in violent incidents & violent behaviour, including restraint
- A reduction in the power differential between adults and children, and increased mutuality in relationships
- Leaders do a good job maintaining and developing culture, practice, people, and systems

SAFETY

- Children feel an increased sense of security, acceptance, and recognition
- Practitioners are confident in their ability to manage potentially violent situations
- Everyone within our community feels safe enough to share their vulnerability, seek help, and own their fears and worries

RECOVERY

- Adults and children have learned better ways of coping with trauma and adversity
- There are regular opportunities for managers and peers to process their experiences of violence
- Workers are able to reflect and reconcile unresolved issues arising from violent experiences

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

- Learning opportunities are concerned with nurturing our sense of self in relation to others
- Learning is concerned with understanding what we do and why
- The responses of practitioners when violence occurs supports the moral development of those involved, support recover, and reconcile relational difficulties

Implications for Workforce Wellbeing

Creating a psychologically-safe space

A *holding space* in which participants could acknowledge the emotional, moral, and psychological impact of their experiences.

From discomfort to discovery

Participants moved through discomfort, confusion, curiosity, and personal discovery, moving from self-reflection that of professional practice.

Power of dialogue

Complexity and dissonance were explored and, to some extent, resolved through respective listening and supportive challenge.

Impact

Demonstrated the value of intentionally creating psychologically safe spaces away from day-to-day operations. The quality of dialogue and mutual care strengthened the caring capacity of the community of practice.

thank you

"I feel like I have a clearer idea of what I'm actually seeing when certain behaviours come up, and I'm a bit more tuned-in to what might be sitting underneath them. It's made me pause and think more, rather than just react on autopilot."

"If there was a lightbulb moment, it was realising how much of my background influences how I see and respond to violence. That hit me a bit, but in a useful way."