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Theories of Violence Against Women in Intimate Relationships

In one of the most comprehensive reviews of the theoretical literature on violence against women, Lewis Okun (1986) pointed out at least 20 distinct theories of either family violence, woman abuse, or other types of violence in conjugal relationships. Almost 25 years have passed since the publication of his book, and during this time, many more perspectives on violence against women have been developed and tested. Even so, no single theory can fully explain violence against women (Brownridge, 2009). Certainly, we will not review all of the relevant theories here. Instead, we will present the major arguments of some of the most widely used and cited contemporary theoretical perspectives. We begin by turning to psychological approaches.

Psychological Approaches

Why do men assault the women they love? One of the most common answers to this question is that these men must be "sick" or mentally disturbed. How could a "normal" person punch, kick, stab, rape, or shoot someone he deeply loves and depends on? The media contribute to the widespread belief that men who assault or kill female intimates are "sick." For example, the media's use of quotations such as, "We don't know what happened" typically "makes the cause of death appear inexplicable or the result of a man's suddenly having 'snapped'" (Myers, 1997, p. 110). There is also much discussion about the contribution of male personality disorders.

Personality Disorders

Psychological accounts of violence against women are not as popular today as they were in the early 1970s, but several researchers still contend that many men beat women because they are mentally ill, suffer from personality disorders, or consume large quantities of drugs or alcohol. For example, one of Dutton's (2006) key assertions is that most perpetrators of intimate partner violence have personality disorders and that "this reality has been concealed by misleading theories that wife assault is normatively acceptable, an absurd assertion without empirical support" (p. xi). Dutton further argues that psychoeducational groups, such as the common batterer intervention programs, are highly problematic and therefore, "public policy must be driven by recognition of attachment-based personality disorder as central to therapeutic change" (p. xi).

Certainly, it is difficult sometimes to see men like this one who abused his rural Ohio partner as anything other than sick:

He ended up bringing someone into the relationship, which I didn't want, but he told me that if I didn't do it he would leave me. And I ended up staying with him. He was more into group sex and, uh, trying to be the big man. He wanted sex in a group thing or with his buddies or made me have sex with a friend of his. See one time he made me have sex with a friend of his for him to watch, and then he got mad and hit me afterwards. I mean he tied me up so I could watch him have sex with a 13-year-old girl. And then he ended up going to prison for it. So, I mean it was nasty. (cited in DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009, p. 70)

Does this man suffer from a personality disorder? Perhaps he does, but most abusers do not (Jasinski, 2001). If only a handful of men abused their current or former partners, it would be easy to accept arguments such as Dutton's. Unfortunately,

data presented throughout this book show that a substantial number of women are abused by men in North America and elsewhere. And, it is estimated that only about 10% of male-to-female violence incidents are spawned by mental illness; thus, psychological perspectives cannot explain the other 90% (Brownridge, 2009; Gelles & Straus, 1988). Moreover, widely read and cited data derived from 840 male batterers in four cities who participated in intake sessions prior to program counseling show that less than half of these men showed signs of personality disorders and only 25% showed signs of severe mental disorder (Gondolf, 2003). The author of the study correctly concluded that "there is little evidence for a prevailing 'abusive personality' typified by borderline personality tendencies" (Gondolf, 1999, p. 13).

As Katz (2006) notes in his analysis of men who abuse women:

Most men who assault women are not so much disturbed as they are disturbingly normal. Like all of us, they are products of familial and social systems. They are our sons, brothers, friends, and coworkers. As such, they are influenced not only by individual factors, but also by broader cultural attitudes and beliefs about manhood that shape their psyches and identities. And *ours*. (p. 28)

There are some other problems with explanations that emphasize personality disorders or psychopathy. For example, if violent husbands, cohabiting and estranged partners, and boyfriends are in fact suffering from some disorder, then why do so many of them only beat their wives and not their bosses, friends, or neighbors? Admittedly, many men do attack these others, but men who beat or rape women in intimate relationships generally do not have convictions for violence outside the home. If we are dealing with men who have terrible problems with self-control, how do they manage to keep from hitting people until they are at home alone with their loved ones? How do they manage to exercise

self-control until they are in a situation where they can generally get away with beating someone up? If they are "out of control," then why do they only beat their partners instead of killing them (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996)? These questions cannot be answered by theories such as Dutton's (2006) that ignore the unequal distribution of power between men and women in North American society and in intimate or domestic contexts (Bograd, 1988; Jasinski, 2001).

Evolutionary Perspectives

Some evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988) argue that male violence against women is the result of competition for sexual access to women. The concept of male proprietariness is emphasized in evolutionary thought, and it is defined as "the tendency [of men] to think of women as sexual and reproductive 'property' they can own and exchange" (Wilson & Daly, 1992, p. 85). Proprietariness refers to "not just the emotional force of [the male's] own feelings of entitlement but to a more pervasive attitude [of ownership and control] toward social relationships [with intimate female partners]" (p. 85).

Men kill not only men, but also women. Why, then, do so many men beat, rape, or kill female intimates? As Kimmel (2000) notes, "to murder or assault the person you are trying to inseminate is a particularly unwise reproductive strategy" (p. 244). Another challenge to evolutionary theory is that many societies have much lower rates of male violence than those of the United States and Canada. So if "boys will be boys," they "will do so differently" (Kimmel, 2000), depending on where they live, their peer groups, social class position and race, and a host of other factors (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2005; Messerschmidt, 1993).

Because violence against female intimates is an ongoing, ever-changing problem, numerous scholars, practitioners, and activists contend that we must constantly reflect on our past contributions to the field and develop new ways of understanding and preventing the myriad highly

injurious and sometimes lethal behaviors that typically occur in private places. Thus, despite the criticisms of the above two perspectives, many sociologists, including those who are feminists, are integrating some psychological accounts into their analyses of how gender and other sociocultural forces influence rape, beatings, stalking, psychological abuse, and the like.

Social Psychological Perspectives

Frequently referred to as either process theories (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2004), micro-oriented perspectives (Jasinski, 2001), or as individual-level explanations (Johnson, 1996), social psychological theories focus on the subjective experiences of individuals in large- and small-scale social settings (Ellis, 1987). Social psychology is defined here as "an attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others" (Allport, 1968, p. 1).

Social Learning Theory

There are various types of social learning theories, but all of them share one common argument: Violence and aggression are not inherent properties of the individual; rather, they are learned behaviors. The social learning theory that is most often used to explain woman abuse in intimate relationships is the intergenerational transmission theory (Levinson, 1989). Briefly, proponents of this theory maintain that male children are more likely to grow up to assault female intimates if their parents abused them or if they observed their fathers assaulting their spouses (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2005).

The intergenerational transmission theory has some empirical support and is accepted across the political spectrum. However, as Straus et al. (1981) correctly points out, it is wrong to "put the whole burden of violence on what is

learned in the family" (p. 122). For example, many people who were raised in relatively nonviolent homes abuse their female partners and children. On the other hand, there are many people who have directly experienced child abuse or have watched their fathers beat their mothers but who have never beaten their marital/cohabiting partners or children (Barnett et al., 2005). While many children's violent fathers may be directly or indirectly teaching them to become wife beaters, their mothers may spend a substantial amount of time and effort teaching them that wife beating is wrong and that their future wives/cohabiting partners deserve to be treated much better than they are being treated (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Children are not "hollow beings" who emulate whatever they see. Most of them have a sense of justice and fairness, and many are likely to regard wife beating as "bad" or "evil" (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

This is not to say that the family is not a key "training ground" for woman abuse and child abuse (Straus et al., 1981). However, people also learn violence and other forms of intimate abuse from external sources such as the media and male peers.

Feminist Theories

Unlike the theories reviewed thus far, feminist perspectives focus on how broader social forces such as patriarchy contribute to violence against women. There are different definitions of patriarchy, but it is referred to here as "a sexual system of power in which the male possesses superior power and economic privilege" (Eisenstein, 1980, p. 16). In addition to paying much attention to the ways in which patriarchy is related to myriad male assaults on women, feminist theorists reject narrow, legalistic definitions of violence and favor the broader ones described earlier in this chapter (Renzetti, 2008). It is difficult to review feminist accounts in a few pages because there

are competing definitions of feminism and there are many different types of feminism (Maidment, 2006). However, for the purpose of this chapter, we offer Daly and Chesney-Lind's (1988) definition of feminism as "a set of theories about women's oppression and a set of strategies for change" (p. 502).

While there are a variety of feminist theories of woman abuse in adult heterosexual relationships, most of them share the view that men abuse women to maintain power and control over them (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Saunders, 1988). Most feminist accounts also assert the following:

- Gender, power, and patriarchy are key explanatory factors.
- Intimate relationships change over time and must be understood in that context.
- It is essential to listen to women's experiences to develop a theory of woman abuse.
- Scholarship and research should be used to support women (Bograd, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Jasinski, 2001).

Feminists are also united by a deep desire to eliminate all forms of gender inequality and their injurious consequences, such as violence against women. Moreover, the goal of feminist scholars is "not to push men out so as to pull women in, but rather to gender the study of crime and criminal justice" (Renzetti, 1993, p. 232), as well as other social problems (e.g., poverty, unemployment, health care). Gender refers to "the sociocultural and psychological shaping, patterning, and evaluating of female and male behavior" (Schur, 1984, p. 10).

Even today, most experts would agree with Okun's (1986) assertion that feminism is "the most important theoretical approach to conjugal violence/woman abuse" (p. 100). However, of all the variants of feminist thought scattered throughout the literature, it is radical feminism that has had the greatest impact on the sociological study of woman abuse (DeKeseredy, Ellis, & Alvi, 2005). Radical feminists contend that the

most important set of social relations in any society is found in patriarchy. All other social relations, such as class, are secondary and originate from male-female relations (Beirne & Messerschmidt, 1991). Applied to violence against women, radical feminist theory argues that men engage in this behavior because they need or desire to control women (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). This statement made by British feminist Jill Radford (1987) exemplifies this perspective: "It is clear that men's violence is used to control women, not just in their own individual interests, but also in the interests of men as a sex class in the reproduction of heterosexuality and male supremacy" (p. 43).

Radical feminists have played a vital role in "breaking the silence" on the multidimensional nature of male-to-female victimization (Kelly, 1988), and they have successfully demonstrated that this problem is "widespread" and "omnipresent" in advanced Western societies and elsewhere (Liddle, 1989). Nevertheless, other feminists have criticized radical feminists on several grounds, including that they ignore the influence of social class and tend to see all men as being equally likely to victimize female intimates (Messerschmidt, 1993). Although woman abuse certainly occurs in all classes and occupations, a large literature shows that some groups are more likely than others to produce batterers, rapists, and other types of woman abusers (Schwartz, 1988).

An interesting methodological debate between radical feminist theorists and other feminists concerns the proper subjects for research on abuse. Most work in this tradition has consisted of in-depth interviews with women who have first-hand experience with violence. An important argument that is a central component of feminist research is the validation of women's experiences. Some critics feel that by not listening to men, but rather to women talking about their experiences with men, radical feminist researchers do not take into account the accuracy of information about men's motives for violence (LaFlame, 2009; Liddle, 1989). Attacks on patriarchy, according to some feminist critics, would

be better conducted by studying the social construction of male offenders (Scully, 1990).

Radical feminism has also been criticized from the right. For example, Dutton (2006), among others (e.g., Gelles, 1993), refers to radical feminist theories of woman abuse as single-factor accounts that have little explanatory value in social science. Radical feminist theories such as Radford's (1987) are also seen by some conservative social scientists as political agendas and as difficult to verify (Fekete, 1994; Levinson, 1989). However, most feminists have no problem being labeled political, and they hope that their work will help reduce much pain and suffering. There is now a large feminist theoretical literature combining both macro- and micro-level forces, such as unemployment, globalization, deindustrialization, life events stress, intimate relationship status, familial and societal patriarchy, substance abuse, male peer support, and other factors (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007). Today, many feminist scholars strongly agree with what Claire Renzetti (1997) argued more than a decade ago:

Of course, while the causes of and solutions to the problems are not individualistic, but rather structural, we cannot lose sight of individuals. The challenge we confront is to disentangle the complex relationships between individuals and society, including our own roles in this dialectic. A tall order, no doubt, but the only one with any chance of real success. (p. vii)

Integrated Theories

Although there are some prominent scholars who strongly oppose theoretical integration (e.g., Hirschi, 1989) or the creation of what Jasinski (2001) refers to as multidimensional theories, such work is increasingly being done today and here we offer two main examples: DeKeseredy and Schwartz's (2002) economic exclusion/male

peer support model and the ecological framework, which has roots in the pioneering scholarship of Bronfenbrenner (1977).

Economic Exclusion/Male Peer Support Model

Feminists point out that some women are more vulnerable than others to violence, including women living in poverty (DeKeseredy, Schwartz, & Alvi, 2008; Holzman & Piper, 1998). For example, in DeKeseredy, Alvi, Schwartz, and Perry's (1999) survey of six public housing estates, 19.3% of the 216 women surveyed stated that they were harmed by one or more of the listed forms of physical violence. This is much higher than what is found in surveys of the general population. Even so, the possibility exists that this figure for public housing women is still too low, as Renzetti and Maier (2002) discovered in a qualitative study that 33% reported victimization.

Why is victimization so high in public housing? DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2002) do not blame physical conditions. Instead, they offer a theory heavily informed by Sernau's (2001, p. 24) web of exclusion model, DeKeseredy and Schwartz's (1993) expanded male peer support model, and Young's (1999) work on social exclusion.

Briefly, in their attempt to show how macro-level forces shape male interpersonal dynamics and woman abuse, DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2002) argue that recent economic transformations in North America (e.g., the shift from a manufacturing to a service-based economy) displace working class men and women who often end up in urban public housing or other "clusters of poverty" (Sernau, 2001). Unable to economically support their families and live up to their culturally defined role as bread winner, socially and economically excluded men experience high levels of stress because "their normal paths for personal power and prestige have been cut off" (Raphael, 2001). Such stress prompts them to

seek social support from male peers with similar problems.

Such support may help men resolve intimate relationship problems or facilitate the management of their stress, "but there are no guarantees that such a resolution is free of cost" (Vaux, 1985, p. 102). As demonstrated by studies of woman abuse in dating (e.g., DeKeseredy, 1988a; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997), male peer support may alleviate dating life events stress, but it can also have negative consequences for the health and safety of women. For example, DeKeseredy (1988b) found that for men with high levels of such stress, social ties with abusive peers were strongly related to woman abuse in Canadian university dating. Similarly, patriarchal male peer support in public housing promotes sexual assault and other highly injurious "macho activities" (Raphael, 2001).

The economic exclusion/male peer support model fills several gaps in the theoretical literature on violence against women, but it is not a predictive model. Further, like any social scientific perspective, it can be improved. For example, consistent with integrated male peer support theories of woman abuse on campus and in rural communities (e.g., Godenzi, Schwartz, & DeKeseredy, 2001; DeKeseredy, Donnermeyer, Schwartz, Tunnell, & Hall, 2007), DeKeseredy and Schwartz's (2002) theory of public housing woman abuse does not specifically address whether members of patriarchal male peer groups are intentionally recruited into these alliances or whether they gravitate to such groups as a way of selectively attempting to sustain or receive support for their earlier acquired values and behaviors. The model also does not specify that men may interact with and be influenced by peers who live away from public housing. Another point to consider is that like every male peer support model, racial/ethnic variations in male peer support dynamics remain to be examined.

DeKeseredy and Schwartz's (2002) model responds to the call for moving the experiences

of socially and economically marginalized women to the center of empirical and theoretical work on woman abuse (Ptacek, 1999).

Ecological Models

Ecological models address multiple levels of influence and maintain that violence against women should be examined within a nested set of environmental contexts or systems (Brownridge, 2009; Graham-Bermann & Gross, 2008; Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2005). Ecological models include the following levels:

- **Macrosystem**—This refers to broader cultural factors, such as patriarchal attitudes and beliefs about gender relations in intimate relationships.
- **Exosystem**—This concept refers to informal and formal social networks that connect intimate relationships to the broader culture.
- **Microsystem**—This refers to the relationship in which violence takes place.
- **Ontogenic**—This level refers to a person's individual development and what such development brings to the above three levels. (Brownridge, 2009; Dutton, 2006)

In sum, then, according to ecological theorists, to obtain a rich understanding of why men assault women,

we need to understand the genetic endowments of those individuals, the microsystem in which they grew up, the microsystem in which they are currently embedded, characteristics of the neighborhood within which their family functions (including the availability of social support and social services, and relationships between the community and criminal justice system), and the larger society that embraces all the separate neighborhoods. (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2005)

Ecological models are appealing to many researchers because they direct attention to different levels of analysis and to a broad range of factors that contribute to violence against women (Dasgupta, 2002; Dutton, 2006). Moreover, these models are flexible and can be modified to fit the topic being studied and the scholar's personal style (Brownridge, 2009; Heise, 1998). However, any ecological model is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to test in its entirety. Conducting a study that effectively addresses all four levels identified here would be "prohibitively expensive" and involve doing sophisticated longitudinal research with a very large sample (Graham-Bermann & Gross, 2008). Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, there has never been an attempt to conduct a study that addresses each of the above levels of the ecological model.

Conclusion

There is sharp disagreement over what constitutes violence against women. There is also a growing number of attempts to explain why women are assaulted by male intimates, some of which were briefly reviewed here. Whatever theory resonates for readers, it is undeniable that the long-term attention given to the issue of violence against women has created profound opportunities for social transformation. At the core of this social change was the act of naming violence as an issue in itself, rather than as a reaction or inevitable outcome of another problem. Naming violence against women by their male partners as a separate problem symbolically transformed women from invisible appendages of male intimate partners to separate individuals (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997).

If defining violence against women is the subject of much debate, the same can be said about theorizing this gendered problem. For example, at the time of writing this chapter, there were heated exchanges between some psychologists

(e.g., Dutton, 2006) and feminist scholars (e.g., DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007; Gondolf, 2003) about what they respectively assert to be the primary determinants of violence against women. Still, despite the widespread nature of male-to-female abuse, many people find psychological perspectives to be the most appealing because they still believe that violence against women is a function of mental illness and that it can be easily solved through individual therapy or counseling. On the other hand, sociological accounts are not popular among the general population because they call for transforming our social, political, economic, and cultural order (Loseke, Gelles, & Cavanaugh, 2005), which is a more difficult task and challenges those who gain from maintaining the status quo.

For many women, especially those who are battered, psychologically abused, or sexually assaulted, a key point to consider here is whether researchers' definitions and theories are sensitive to their subjective experiences. The experiences of women who live with abuse or its memories are touchstones for people working to end all forms of violence against women. These touchstones are vital sources of commonality across the varied perspectives that scholars bring to violence against women and its prevention, some of which have been summarized in this chapter (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997).

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