The etiology of domestic violence against women: A theoretical overview

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Abstract
Historically, a man's right to control his mate through violence has been legally and culturally sanctioned. The expression "rule of thumb" originates in ancient Rome and refers to the common law practice which allowed a man to strike his wife with a stick provided the stick was no thicker than his thumb (Gelles, 1987).
THE ETIOLOGY OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN:
A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

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The Etiology of Domestic Violence Against Women:
A Theoretical Overview

Historically, a man's right to control his mate through violence has been legally and culturally sanctioned. The expression "rule of thumb" originates in ancient Rome and refers to the common law practice which allowed a man to strike his wife with a stick provided the stick was no thicker than his thumb (Gelles, 1987).

It was not until the 1970s that violence against women came to be recognized as a widespread public issue (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983). While public awareness continues to grow, helping professionals and paraprofessionals are still in the early stages of understanding how best to help battered women (Margolyn, Sibner, & Gleberman, 1988).

Problems for helpers in the field of domestic violence are numerous. Myths concerning the personality and psychological characteristics of battered women continue to abound. The myth of female masochism, for instance, suggests that victims perpetuate, and even like, their own abuse (Kuhl, 1984). A feminist analysis of many current interventions reveals that they are
often based on these prevailing male-defined cultural myths about women rather than on scientific theory and research (Bograd, 1982).

A further problem for all members of our culture, including helping professionals, is the acceptability of the idea of male dominance over women. Although challenged by the rise in feminist consciousness, this idea still prevails in our patriarchal society. Lower earnings for women in the workplace, the isolation of childrearing and household responsibilities, and economic dependence on men speak of the unequal division of power between the sexes (Okun, 1986). Battering is only one of many ways of "keeping women in their place," (Schaef, 1981, p. 69).

Meanwhile, a conservative estimate shows that 1.8 million women are assaulted by their mates each year, and from 1974 to 1983, well over 19,000 American men and women died in incidents of and relating to domestic violence, including suicides and spousal homicides (Okun, 1986). Clearly more needs to be done to ensure the safety, emotional health, and economic independence of battered women. A more thorough understanding of the causes of violence against women can lead to the
The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of the current theories regarding the etiology of domestic violence against women in our culture. This is not intended to be an exhaustive exploration of the considerable number of theoretical perspectives on this problem. Rather, it is intended to suggest the overall complexity and variety of issues and influences that can combine and give rise to the abuse of women in intimate relationships.

There is a dilemma in attempting to summarize theories regarding the etiology of the abuse of women: while the list of such theories is lengthy, empirical data to support them are meager (Bograd, 1983). Empirical research pitting one theory against another is almost nonexistent, which makes it difficult to compare the relative utility of various theories (Margolyn, et al., 1988). Also, though domestic abuse is usually discussed as a single phenomenon, a variety of types of battered women have been identified in the literature, reflecting a large degree of variability in the women's individual histories, current relationships, and responses to the abuse. Margolyn, et al. (1988) suggest
that this variability may account for the numerous theories and inconsistencies in the data. Theories regarding battered women lack a well-developed typology; hence it is difficult to present them without tying them to a specific type of abuse (Loseke & Cahill, 1984, Margolyn, et al. 1988). To avoid these problems, Margolyn et al. order their discussion of theories around three levels of explanation: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural. For purposes of organization, these levels will also be used in this paper.

Theories at the Intrapersonal Level

A study of domestic violence against women at the intrapersonal level, which assumes that one or both partners possess characteristics that make them prone to violence, is often problematic in that it tends to focus on pathological issues (Bograd, 1982). For instance, batterers have been found to be characteristically sadistic, passive-aggressive, addiction prone, pathologically jealous, passive and dependent, and to possess neurological or biochemical disorders (Elliot, 1977; Fagan, Stewart, & Hansen, 1983; Walker, 1986). By contrast, battered women have been labeled masochistic, aggressive, masculine, sexually frigid, and immature
Kuhl, 1984). A comparison of these lists of characteristics suggests that men may not be held as accountable for their behavior as women, and further suggests that a woman's psychological make-up and symptoms are to blame for the abuse she suffers (Bograd, 1982).

More recent studies have become more sensitive to issues of responsibility, particularly with respect to women (Hartman, 1987; Kuhl, 1984). Studies indicate, for example, that battered women tend to suffer from depression, anxiety, substance abuse, are low in ego-strength and self-esteem, are suicidal, and have elevated MMPI profiles (Gelles, 1987; Gesino, Smith, & Keckich, 1982; Walker, 1983).

Bograd (1982) cautions practitioners against viewing battering as evidence of a woman's more basic psychological dysfunction, saying that too often, "effect is confounded with cause," (p. 71). A women may be depressed or paranoid because she is beaten.

Because violence against women is increasingly being viewed as a relatively common occurrence, attention is being focused on less pathologically oriented explanations (Margolyn, et al., 1988). Walker (1983) discusses several attitudinal studies which
describe batterers as conservative, rigid men who hold traditional, sex-stereotyped values, and suggests that these men in relationships with non-traditional women may be particularly violence prone. In addition, the acceptability of violence in intimate relationships shows that abused wives, as well as battering husbands, express more approval of violence than do non-violent couples (Gelles & Straus, 1988).

Other studies indicate that battered women are no different from non-battered women and caution is given about labeling battered women and their behavior "deviant" (Loseke & Cahill, 1984). In fact, Walker (1983) notes that many battered women perceive themselves as stronger, more independent, and more sensitive than other women.

In summary, an examination of the etiology of domestic violence against women at the intrapersonal level reveals that there may be certain psychological characteristics in batterers and their victims that make them constitutionally violence prone or vulnerable to violence prone men. Yet in attempting to understand the problems and issues of women in battering relationships, one must not stop at this level. To deepen our
comprehension we must also examine battering at the interpersonal level.

Theories at the Interpersonal Level

Interpersonal explanations focus on the interactions of people involved with each other, particularly in families. Three main theories fit this category: social learning, systems, and cycle (Margolyn, et al., 1988).

In social learning theory, individual behavior is considered to be determined by the social environment in which it occurs, particularly the family environment (Corsini, 1984). Specific mechanisms whereby family members influence each other to perform violent behaviors are modeling, reinforcement, and coercion (Okun, 1986).

The intergenerational transmission of violence is one of the most consistent etiological characteristics of the abuse of women, and serves to illustrate the idea of modeling (Gelles, 1987). The more individuals are exposed to violence as children (both as victims and observers) the more they are inclined to be violent, to approve of violence, and to be victims of violence as adults (Gelles & Straus, 1988). The responses of battered women may also be a function of modeling, where
daughters observe their mothers in avoidant, passive, and non-help seeking behaviors in battering situations and respond similarly as adults who are themselves battered (Finn, 1985; Walker, 1983).

In contrast to modeling, which revolves around the interaction with one's family of origin, reinforcement involves interaction with the battering partner. Reinforcement describes the phenomenon whereby a behavior or set of behaviors increases in frequency as a result of their producing a desired effect (Corsini, 1984). In other words, a man's battering occurs more often if it produces a desired outcome (e.g. compliance or submission on the part of the woman) according to Okun (1986). At the same time, the woman is negatively reinforced—the termination of a stimulus leads to an increase in the behavior that precedes the termination—for making placating gestures or taking the blame that seems to end the attack (Margolyn, et al., 1988).

Another theory which depends upon the mechanism of reinforcement is the phenomenon of "traumatic bonding," (Painter & Dutton, 1985). Intermittent positive reinforcers in the form of abuse combine with an unequal power structure in the relationship to produce a traumatically based bond between the batterer and the
victim. This bond is similar in ways to that between captor and hostage or cult leader and follower. The coupling of punishment and reward in the form of the violence itself and the loving contrition that usually follows, as well as the unpredictability of such reinforcement, creates a strong probability that the abuse will continue indefinitely without outside intervention (Painter & Dutton, 1985).

Okun (1986) discusses the phenomenon of coercion, which refers to the overall process by which intimates learn to control each other's behavior through the use of aversive or painful stimuli. With the batterer positively reinforced and the victim negatively reinforced, their overall interaction tends to escalate and intensify over time. Walker (1983) traces her theory of "learned helplessness" to the childhood experience of violence in the home, where there exists a state of "uncontrollability or non-contingency between the child's response and outcome," (p. 93). Gelles (1987) describes several cognitive features of "learned helplessness" in relation to the coercion process. Repeated beatings, and their consequent lowering of self-esteem, leave a woman with the feeling that she cannot control what will happen to her and that she is
unable to protect herself from or to prevent further assaults. Like laboratory animals after receiving repeated shocks from which there is no escape, the woman learns she is helpless to control the situation in which she is a victim.

Systems theory provides a different interpersonal perspective on the battering of women by assuming that the violence is a systemic product rather than a result of individual pathology (Bograd, 1984). According to this theory, all interdependent parts serve to maintain the homeostatic balance of a system as reflected in its current pattern of interaction (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1985).

Gelles and Straus (1988) observe that a variety of characteristics of family systems make them ripe for violence, including the amount of time spent together, the intensity of involvement between members, impinging activities and needs, and the right to try to influence one another. Other characteristics of the battering system include poor communication, in which distortion and misinterpretation abound, and in which feelings, if expressed at all, are relayed indirectly (Porter, 1986). Violent couples exist in a closed system, with rigid boundaries between themselves and the outside world.
They have inflexible family rules, including a rule of secrecy about the violence, and have difficulty setting and maintaining limits (Bograd, 1984).

Systems theory also explains how violence becomes stabilized within a system or serves as a stimulus for disrupting it. For instance, Bograd (1984) discusses the relationship between the battering man and his victim as one of "enforced complimentarily," (p.560). As such, the man is superior and primary while the woman is inferior and secondary with little freedom to renegotiate strict relationship rules and roles. Efforts to gain control of the relationship escalate in a symmetrical fashion between the partners. The battering incident serves as a homeostatic mechanism which reinstates the complimentarily between the partners (Bograd, 1984).

On the other hand, violence can eventually serve to disrupt the system. Ferraro and Johnson (1983) discuss six catalysts which help a battered woman reject prior rationalizations and coping strategies in favor of leaving the relationship: (a) a change in the level of violence, (b) a change in resources, (c) a change in the relationship, (d) despair, (e) a change in the visibility of the violence, and (f) opening the system
to allow external definitions of the relationship. For battered women who seek outside assistance, a decision is made to allow new insight and to make family boundaries more permeable to outside influence. These alternative sources of feedback seem crucial in a woman's ability to leave the battering system (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983).

Bograd (1984) integrates systems theory with a feminist perspective and cautions practitioners to be aware of their own biases in the larger context of the social system in which we all live. Violence must always be considered a primary treatment issue, not simply one of many problems which are products of a troubled system. She notes how the physical and emotional realities of violence tend to disappear as battering is minimized, over-contextualized, or described in the mechanistic terms of systems language. The allocation of blame is also an issue in Bograd's feminist critique. It is one thing to say that partners interact in specific and patterned ways to maintain the violence. It is quite another to say that each partner is equally responsible for the battering. According to Bograd, feminist values are clear in the allocation of responsibility for the violence: (a) no woman deserves
to be beaten, and (b) men are solely responsible for their actions. In short, "functional descriptions of process are not equivalent to moral assessments of responsibility" (p. 561).

Walker's "cycle" theory of violence provides another perspective on domestic violence against women at the interpersonal level. The cycle begins with a tension-building stage characterized by verbal abuse, threats, and minor battering incidents. At this stage the woman may believe she can control the behavior of the man and may attempt to calm him with nurturance and compliance. Her motive is to keep the violence from escalating. However, escalation occurs in spite of her efforts to the contrary. Tension building gives way to the acute battering stage in which the man unleashes a barrage of verbal and physical abuse which serves to discharge the tension. Usually, this stage of the cycle is short in duration. It is followed by the resolution stage in which the man is profusely apologetic and remorseful and exhibits kindness and loving behavior. A more peaceful neutrality between the partners exists for a time. Eventually the calm gives way to a slow building of tension and the cycle repeats itself. Gelles and Straus (1988) believe it is the full
cycle of violence and not just the battering incident itself that inflicts the powerful psychic and physical damage on the battered woman.

To summarize this discussion of theories regarding the etiology of violence against women at the interpersonal level, it is clear that many kinds of interactions and influences can give rise to battering. The variety of concepts presented thus far have been criticized as being contradictory (Bograd, 1982). Yet they need not be mutually exclusive. Social learning theory explains how violence in childhood can influence a person's attitude towards violence which is generalized to adult life. The concepts of reinforcement, coercion, and systems suggest ways in which battering can persist and intensify over time. A systems perspective also suggests how a violent system can be disrupted by various catalysts and outside influences. Finally, "cycle" theory illustrates the dynamics of battering and the destructive power inherent in the overall process. Yet to more fully understand the etiology of battering, one must also explore the social context in which it occurs.
Theories at the Sociocultural Level

At this level of explanation, theories explore the historical, cultural, legal, and political factors contributing to domestic violence against women. In this context, battering is seen as a phenomenon endemic to patriarchal society, a cultural system in which women have been assigned a secondary position of power and influence. Without an understanding of these factors, many professionals and women's rights advocates believe that the problems of battered women cannot be sufficiently addressed (Bograd, 1982, 1984; Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Gelles, 1987; Hartman, 1987; Kuhl, 1984; Schaef, 1981).

As noted earlier, a man's right and privilege to inflict violence on his mate is ancient. Davidson (1977) believes one must go backward in time more than 2000 years, to pre-Biblical times, to find an era when abusers of women did not have custom and the law on their side. He discusses the demise of the Great Mother Goddess cultures and the concurrent rise of the Judeo-Christian patriarchy as a possible starting point for the culturally sanctioned abuse of women. When themes of punishment and eternal revenge became part of the prevailing creation story told in the Bible, as well as
the inherent evil and moral weakness of the female sex, the abuse of women could be justified as not only the right of men, but the will of God.

Before 1871, the laws of the United States permitted a husband to go unpunished for "beating [his wife] with a stick, pulling her hair, choking her, spitting in her face, kicking her about the floor," (Davidson, 1977, p. 4). While the right of men to use physical punishment on their partners is no longer present under the law, the legal system persists in offering women less protection from battering mates than from strangers who would inflict the same types of assault (Okun, 1986).

Denial of the problem of abuse is often the prevailing attitude among prosecutors and judges. In 1975, for example, a judge heard a wife-beating case in which a high-salaried executive has broken three bones in his wife's face (Davidson, 1977). The judge chose to forego a formal hearing, instead holding an informal settlement discussion in his chambers. He said later that this was the best way to handle that type of situation--a family matter which could best be settled without the "airing of dirty laundry" (p. 2). As late as 1982, a Kansas case saw a convicted batterer
sentenced to buy his wife a box of chocolates (Okun, 1986).

On a cultural level, there exists a norm permitting family members to hit or assault one another, particularly in the interest of childrearing. Gelles and Straus (1988) discuss the messages beneath such normative behavior. First of all, love is associated with violence in the child's mind. The message is that those who love, hit, and have a right to hit. Secondly, the message that when something is really important it justifies the use of physical force is brought home with each incident of hitting. These messages can be generalized beyond the parent-child relationship to the marital one (Gelles & Straus, 1988).

Apparently the normalization of violence in intimate relationships is learned quite well. Margolyn, et al. (1988) cite two studies of attitudes towards violence between mates: In the first, 25 percent of the persons surveyed approved of a husband or wife hitting the other under certain conditions. In the second study, subjects reading a description of an assault in which a woman was knocked unconscious were asked to indicate the severity of punishment that was warranted. Those who believed the husband was the assailant assigned less
severe punishment than subjects who believed the assailant to be a known male companion or a stranger.

The role of external stressors in family violence is examined by Porter (1986), who finds that stress brought about by work events, including unemployment, underemployment, job dissatisfaction, or isolation brought about by job relocation, correlates significantly with incidents of violence against women. The family is particularly vulnerable to outside stress and its violent consequences because it is traditionally the place to "let off steam" from the pressures of the outside world (Gelles, 1987).

Domestic violence against women can be traced to other sources that create a position of inequality for women in our culture. As has already been noted, patriarchal society has taught men to dominate women—and violence is one way of doing so (Schaef, 1981). Through the unequal division of labor and lower earning in the workplace, women are kept economically dependent on men and so have difficulty gathering the resources to leave their battering mates. Even if they do leave, they may be driven back by their economic vulnerability (Gelles, 1987).
Women have also been kept isolated by their primary responsibility for childrearing and household duties (Schaef, 1981). Margolyn, et al. (1988) venture that a more egalitarian family structure should be an important step in the solution to the problem of domestic violence. However, the authors caution that during the transitional stage, conflict may be increased as men will feel threatened by their perceived loss of power. In the long run, both men and women must feel comfortable with an egalitarian family structure in order for it to be an effective prevention against abuse in our society.

Conclusion

In exploring the three levels of explanation for domestic violence against women, one begins to get a sense of the magnitude and complexity of the problem, as well as the variability between theories. Intrapersonal theories rely on the notion that certain individual characteristics may be present in batterers and their victims which account for the violence they inflict and endure. Interpersonal theories explore the dynamics and persistence of the problem, as well as the intergenerational variables that often correlate with it. Sociocultural explanations suggest that in a larger
context the historical, legal, political, and cultural influences on all members of society must be considered. It is important for helping professionals and paraprofessionals to be aware of each level of explanation in order to best serve a battered woman's needs with appropriate interventions.

Yet, even with this informed understanding, helpers in the field of domestic abuse must be aware that there is still much that is not known about the problem. As Gelles and Straus (1988) have stated, it is unlikely that more than 2 or 3 percent of all incidents of domestic violence can be attributed to purely intrapersonal characteristics. The interpersonal level describes some of the relationship processes typical of battering couples, but does not adequately explain why some couples resort to violence while others, though profoundly unhappy, remain nonviolent. The same question can be raised with respect to sociocultural explanations: Why are some individuals and couple systems more prone to the negative effects of patriarchal society than others? Although there is data suggesting the profile of the batterer, no predictions can be made about who will become one (Margolyn, et al., 1988). From what is known about the characteristics of
the battered woman, one can only conclude that there is no certain type of woman, but that *every* woman is a potential victim of violence (Loseke & Spencer, 1984).

The search for the etiology of domestic violence against women must continue in order for helping professionals in the field to truly help. The primary goal for everyone concerned with this problem is a reduction in the overall incidence of domestic violence. Increased attention of professionals in many fields, coupled with more accurate diagnosis and more available referrals for treatment, is one important step. Increased attention by the public at large, however, is at least as important. Heightened public awareness is likely to enable battered women to seek the support they need to make decisions about their lives, and to convince batterers that violence against women is not sanctioned by society, is not a private matter, and *is* a crime.
References


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