

Intimate Partner Violence in Context

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INTRODUCTION

Through an extensive analysis of seven relevant articles I give a general insight to domestic violence and conceptualize on the scope of existing literature. More research is badly needed on this subject, not only because of the extent of the problem of intimate partner violence in our society, but also because very little is known about prevention or the effectiveness of service to victims and perpetrators. Through this analysis, I place literature into sociological contexts, apply it to real-world implications including a denunciation of stereotypes, look into possible consequences of reporting abuse, and suggest a different direction for society to head all while recognizing the application this research has on my internship with South Valley Sanctuary, a domestic violence shelter in West Jordan, Utah.

Domestic or Intimate Partner Violence is both a national and a worldwide epidemic, as the literature surrounding it represents. According to the National Violence against Women Study, of 8000 female respondents, 25.5% had been victimized (either by rape, physical assault, being stalked, or a combination) once in their lifetime by an intimate partner (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). That is one in four women on a national scale. On an international level, it is estimated that one in three women will experience violence of some sort in their lifetime, be it rape, beatings, or other types of abuse, much of which originate from an intimate partner or family member (Carillo et al. 2003). Great strides, emerging from the labors of feminist critique in the 1970s, have been made to formalize the disapproval of partner abuse in societal institutions. Despite what has been done, much still needs to be accomplished. This essay analyzes four main topics of interest: 1) the social contexts in which abuse occurs, 2) real-world implications and conceptualizations including an assessment of stereotypes, 3) consequences of reporting abuse, and 4) a suggestion for a different direction.

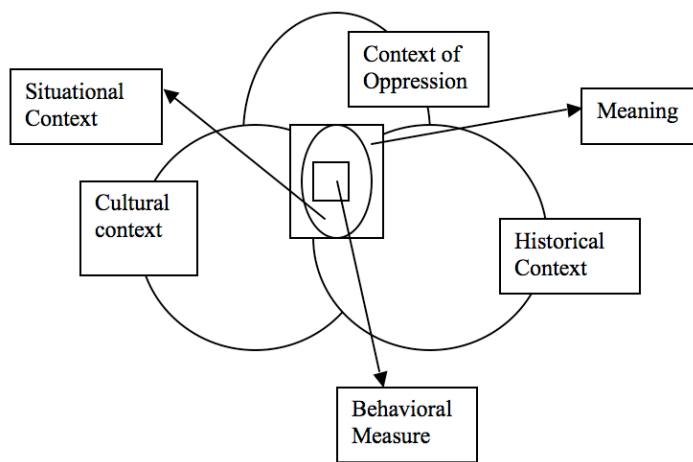
Keeping stride with the cradle of advocacy on behalf of victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), I fully agree with the feminist definition that IPV “Evolves from patriarchal structure that imply women’s

subordinate status in society” (Ruiz-Perez, Mata-Pariente, & Plazaola-Castano 2006). It is wrong to apply demographic explanations (cultural orientation, socio-economic status, or psychological deficiencies) to the occurrence of IPV (Michalski 2004). Doing so results in a reductionistic portrayal of IPV, and oftentimes initiates and fosters harmful stereotypes. In fact, IPV is a complex, not completely understood, social phenomena that is not easily explained by income level, ethnicity, or cultural values. Experience has shown me very few women who seek services with domestic violence shelters have basic resources at their disposal. Most times, advocates are providing survivors with things like food and clothing, as well as getting them in touch with housing options. Although some women may have led a comfortable life with their partner, at this time in crisis those same resources are not at her disposal; therefore discrediting the myth that women of higher socioeconomic status are not abused. In addition, I have seen women from all cultural backgrounds in shelters. In fact, it is our policy to be culturally savvy in anticipation of receiving women from a variety of different cultural backgrounds. The informal and formal policies cover not only things like accessibility of language-interpretation, but also an understanding of religious standpoints which is important to consider in the state of Utah. If we were to uphold the stigma that relationships with domestic violence happen only in poor, minority families, then we would need to explain the prevalence of white, middle-class, LDS women who are utilizing our programs, with whom I have direct experience.

Feminist theories on IPV force it into a discussion of domination and subordination of women in a society that “tends to accept” (Michalski 2004) such behavior. It is not that women are formally degraded on the institutional level (at least not contemporarily). Actually, degradation of women perverts the not-so hidden corridors of our culture on a more micro-level, as may be experienced, for example, in personal relationships when defining household or sexual roles. It is important, then, to develop an understanding of societal implications toward violence. With the frequency of violence in our culture, how can one

explain why some relationships have violence and others do not? Michalski argues that the answer is through an analysis of the structure of interpersonal relationships. If the interactions among partners are healthy, that is: the relationship harbors specific characteristics that condone egalitarian sentiments; the likely-hood of victimization may be weakened. “The approach... emphasizes the immediacy of relational variables and social contexts within which domestic violence tends to occur rather than attributing ‘causality’ to the individual characteristics of perpetrators or survivors” (2004). If the social structure of the relationship is changed, abuse can be eliminated.

Holistic Model of Context Domains Relevant to Intimate Partner Violence Research



(Lindhorst and Tajima 2008)

Lindhorst and Tajima (2008) further develop the complexity of relationships plagued with IPV with a “holistic” model of context domains. In this model they do account for cultural contexts, but it is only a small part of the picture. Interplayed along with a cultural context is an elaboration of historical and oppressive contexts, which altogether formulate a “meaning” of violence. This is further compounded by a situational context. Only after the above criteria are met can one anticipate behavior

With a myriad of theoretical approaches dealing with the societal contexts of domestic violence, it is important to reposition the discussion into real world implications. Victims (and survivors), after all, are actual people who have experienced a sort of “intimate

terrorism” in their lives (a term that was originally coined as “patriarchal terrorism” (Johnson 2005)). In fact, according to a study by Taylor and Sorenson (2005), nearly half of the general public in California personally knows a victim of IPV. Talor and Sorenson (2005) conducted a large-scale phone interview in the State of California to determine if there were general norms regarding attitudes toward intimate partner violence. The researchers set up vignettes describing for the callers a number of varied situations of violence in a relationship and asked them who was at fault, who should take action to resolve the matter, and what advice should be given. The findings reported that there were patterns in responses. Assaultants were most likely to be considered solely at fault (69.2%), but both the victim and the perpetrator together were thought to need to take responsibility to resolve the matter (52.1%). The most frequent way to do this, as advised by the respondents (after agreeing that both the assailant and victim were at fault), was to “talk it out” (72.6%).

When analyzed on a multivariate level, the severity of the abuse and the level of commitment in the relationship both had an effect on the type of advice that was given. If the couple was married, the respondent was more likely to give advice conducive to staying in the relationship. However, if the abuse was “severe,” respondents more often gave advice detrimental to maintaining a relationship. These findings are significant for victim advocates and shelter workers because more often than not victims will disclose abuse to personal relatives and close friends. If the advice that is given means that in severe situations they are, at the very least, advised to leave the relationship, then it is a plus for the work we do. The next step, of course, is to “normalize” access and information on resources to get help.

According to this study, there were several instances in which fault being placed on the victim was heightened. If the victim was viewed as being “provocative,” “drinking heavily”, and previously victimized they were more likely to be blamed for the attacks. Similarly, if the victim was involved in a lesbian relationship, they were more likely to attribute mutual fault and mutual solution responsibility. It is not infrequent that I get these types of responses when the discussion outside my peers steers toward domestic violence. It is unfortunate that instead of embracing a society that does not tolerate violence in any instance; the norms indicate that violence can be used if someone “asks for it”. This may explain why it is difficult at times

to get potential clients to disclose information about abuse happening in their homes. Oftentimes victims not only blame themselves for what is happening to them, but also know that other people blame them.

In all actuality, it has been shown that victims, contrary to conventional stereotypes, actively respond to the abuse that is placed upon them by their partners. In a study conducted in Granada, Spain (Ruiz-Pérez, Mata-Pariente, and Pazaola-Castaño 2006) three different health care centers were polled (females only) to understand the responses of victims and other dynamics of domestic violence. Of those who responded in the affirmative that they were survivors of victims of domestic violence (in this study, 22.8% had experienced IPV at some point in their lifetime), 68.4% answered that they had responded actively to the abuse, *mostly by leaving the relationship* (58.2%). Although I acknowledge that this is hardly a representative sample of women, the study does contradict the reoccurring stereotype that abused women are passive martyrs to the abuse inflicted on them.

It is interesting to note that only 6.3% of the women in this study sought help from battered women's programs. This could either be related to the respondent not needing the programs, or from a lack of knowledge of them. It is entirely important for battered women's programs to conduct awareness campaigns and outreach activities for the community that they serve. I would like to compare and contrast two general experiences I have had on this subject regarding two different domestic violence shelters. I began my profession in domestic violence at a shelter in a smaller rural town in Utah. Before I got the job, I was unaware the shelter even existed. After I received the opportunity to work with survivors in this rural area, I was met with surprise after answering the question of 'what I do' by new acquaintances in the community; "I didn't know we had one of those!" Rarely would there be the manpower or the willingness to conduct large-scale outreach programs needed to build awareness in the community that this smaller shelter served. Granted, South Valley Sanctuary (located in Salt Lake County), is much larger and has more resources at the organization's disposal, but the directors have consciously put awareness, outreach, and community involvement at the forefront. Every month a different program, fundraiser, or conference is happening. When I inform people in Salt Lake City where I am doing my internship, I am rarely met with surprise; people in the community generally know that there are resources available for domestic violence

victims.

Unfortunately, leaving an abusive relationship does not necessarily mean that survivors' lives were void of danger. In an inspirational piece by Aysan Sev're (1997), it is shown that this is not essentially true. Sev're's main argument centers on the feminist theoretical concept of power and control. In a patriarchal context, men are not only socialized to value dominance and control (as well as violence), but they are almost obsessively determined to maintain it. If their status as head of family is challenged, in this case by the woman-initiated separation, they could likely explode in a desperate attempt to regain it. Sev're backs these claims up with specific examples from Canadian media-reports and personal interviews of survivors. Sev're, in an introduction to her topic, cited several studies that coincided with her claim that women who leave abusive relationships were at a greater risk for elevated levels of violence. It must be recognized that her review and conceptualization for this article was not meant to be representative, but more so to lead the discussion in a specific direction.

Pessimistically supporting this on an elevated level, Jeffrey Fagan, in reviewing Harrell, Smith, and Newmark (1993), reports that "60 percent of 300 women interviewed twice within one year after receiving a protective order suffered abuse at least once. Over 1 in 5 reported threats to kill; severe violence was reported by 29 percent, and property damage was reported by 43 percent of the women... Nearly half (48.8 percent) of the men reabused their victims within 2 years of the issuance of a restraining order." (Fagan 1996) This is a very scary thought to domestic violence advocates and shelter workers. If the very thing we encourage women to do, that is: obtain a protective order, actually increases the severity or risk of being revictimized, then why do we do it? The answer is because it is our only option with regards to legal sanctions that are initiated by the victim. There are, of course, criminal charges placed on perpetrators who were seen as primary aggressors at the scene of the violence; but after the fact there is little that the legal system can do without the victim asking for further protection. This fact also puts domestic violence shelter workers and other clients at the shelter at an increased risk after bringing a new client in. Therefore, confidentiality is one of the main concerns for workers in domestic violence shelters. Not only do we not allow incoming personal phone calls, but we also ask that every person (worker, client, volunteer, etc.) sign confidentiality agreements.

“The Criminalization of Domestic Violence: Promises and Limits” (1996) actually had very few promises to depict. Fagan’s conclusions were of the inability of the justice system to adequately handle domestic violence cases, and the lack of research to back up policy. I am critical of this article because it describes an inherent virtuousness in the current justice system and disregards the foundation in which domestic violence awareness was planted. The author describes advances in the criminal justice system’s response to domestic violence as symbolic in nature and that sanctions may not discourage perpetrators. He also alludes to the claim that domestic violence cases are not worth the time and resources that they take, as they could be going to worthier causes (my exaggeration) such as robbery or other stranger on stranger crime. He also critiques the “misuse” of police officers in giving resources to couples involved in a domestic violence relationship.

It is apparent, even at an academic level that patriarchal sentiments abound. I do not accuse Fagan of condoning domestic violence, only of putting all his faith on traditional methods of crime prevention/intervention with little leeway towards innovation. “It is suggested that feminist strategies to use the criminal justice process to achieve liberation, as evidenced by legal reform movements with regard to...family violence, should take into account the limitation of a structure whose predominant determinants are the protection of economic order and ideological legitimacy” (Klein 1981). Should the criminal justice system really be trusted? To a feminist and critical theorist, the answer is no. Societal institutions, in all their forms, are inundated by traditional patriarchal attitudes, and perhaps a better route would be to devote one’s energy to social mind-set shifts. According to Dorie (1981), elimination can be achieved through practice. She sites rape relief groups, domestic violence shelters, and women’s health clinics as good places to start.

With the rejection of the route we are going, new research must be made in the effectiveness of advocacy programs. I did not come across a single article in my research that addressed either of these issues. Rather, I found a multitude of theoretical perspectives that were misguided by reductionist prevalence of demographic reliance; another vast array of articles contained techniques to counteract this. I have been sent to training after training on domestic violence and I have found that for the most part things that were portrayed as hard-facts were actually based

on theoretical knowledge and not properly studied. There is a great value to theory, but it cannot end there. Well-managed experiments need to be performed not only on the effectiveness of services for the victim and perpetrator, but to determine what it may take to invoke a societal mind shift.

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Author Bio

Danielle Wilson graduated with a B.A. in sociology with an emphasis on diversity in 2010. She hopes to pursue a Social Service Worker Certification and work towards a master's in social work. Currently, Danielle is employed with the State of Utah as an Eligibility Specialist with the Department of Workforce Services. She is the mother of a three-year old handful, who is also the love of her life, and will be giving birth to a baby girl in June 2010. Danielle is honored to have had the opportunity for her work to be published, and will continue to seek social justice through the numerous endeavors in her life.