
An analysis report on domestic violence against women

Domestic violence against women is a serious and widespread problem that is just not confined to the UK as Heise et al (1994) indicates that between 20 to 50 per cent of women in most countries experience spousal abuse at least once in their lives. During 1995 almost one third of 4,967 women murdered in the United States were killed by their boyfriend or husbands. Nor does domestic violence stop at mere physical abuse, but can include sexual, verbal, spiritual, emotional or longer lasting psychological abuse that can cause a broad range of health problems including full mental breakdowns. A study by Stark and Flitcroft (1991) suggests that domestic violence may be the single most important cause of female suicides especially among black and pregnant women. Domestic violence also contributes to the reason why 63 per cent of young men between the ages of 11 and 20 yrs who are serving time for homicide killed their mothers' abusers .

For the purpose of this essay, I will concentrate on exploring the issues surrounding the question why do men abuse, and due to word limit, I will concentrate on spousal abuse and the causes and variables that contribute to domestic violence. These causes will include patriarchy, social structural perspective, cycle of violence and alcohol.

Definition

Domestic violence to women is commonly referred to simply as domestic violence but for clarity during this essay I will use the terms domestic violence and abuse interchangeably to refer to violence against women.

The term domestic violence is also a confusing term. It covers many types of abuse and not just acts of physical abuse, as physical violence is usually but one aspect of a now well documented pattern of abuse which may include verbal threats, intimidation, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, physical and social isolation, economic deprivation and the like.

(Dobash and Dobash 1980). Nor does there seem to be a consensus on the severity of violence required for an act to be considered abuse. Because of the above confusion, I have decided to use the definition from the American Psychological Association (APA), which is internationally recognised, respected and used by many professionals and academics.

The APA defines domestic violence as:

A pattern of abusive behaviours including a wide range of physical, sexual and psychological maltreatment used by one person in an intimate relationship against another to gain power unfairly or maintain the person's misuse of power, control and authority (APA .

Background

Until relatively recently, British common law recognised women as the property of their men (the property of the father before marriage when this property transferred to the husband on marriage) and that men had the right to beat their wives under reasonable circumstances which

was known as 'Lawful Correction'.

The husband also might give his wife moderate correction. For as he is to answer for his misbehaviour the law thought it reasonable to entrust him with this power of restraining her by domestic chastisement in the same moderation that a man is allowed to correct his servant or children (Blackstone, 1966, Vol.1 432. Cited in Pahl 1985, 4).

In the United States during 1782 Judge Buller set a precedent that stopped the use of any instrument being used by a man to chastise his wife and brought in the 'rule of thumb'.

However, this law still enabled the husband to chastise his wife with any instrument that WAS no thicker than the man's thumb . This belief that men had the right under certain circumstances to chastise their wives behind closed doors virtually went unchallenged until the end of the second world war, when women's movements began to move into the forefront of society. However women still had to wait another 20 or so years until the late 1960s and 70s before domestic violence went through a evolution from a private matter to a social problem and in the case of wife battering to a statute crime.

The reasons for men being abusive towards their partners are many and varied, however, the first suggested causal factor of domestic violence that I will look at is from the perspective of a feminist who believe men's violence stems from the patriarchy traditions of men's right to control 'their' women.

The Feminist Argument

Feminist theorists such as French (1986) argue that domestic violence is rooted in gender and power that represents men's active attempts to maintain dominance and control over women and the heart of this debate centres on the relative importance of patriarchy.

French's example of patriarchy can be seen in men's participation in world conflicts. Throughout documented history, the man has always been called upon to go to war and violently respond to threats, attacks and invasions. Because war has been glorified, men have become heroes and moral judgement about the legitimacy of male violence is established. Thus violence has become the legitimated form of male behaviour, and the outcome of this process is that violent acts become implicit in the institutionalised definition of masculinity. Men at birth become members of the superior gender and one automatically empowered to have superior rights, roles, opportunities and power in comparison to women. Consequently, men feel violence is an acceptable means of enforcing control (French 1986; Connell 1987; Stark and Flitcroft 1991).

Gelles (1993) acknowledges the role of patriarchy and the theory of unequal power relationships as a cause of domestic violence. However, he suggests that patriarchy is just one variable in a very complex constellation of causes.

In contrast though, Johnson (1995) argues that the feminist explanation of domestic violence is flawed for two reasons. The first reason is that feminist analyses rely too heavily upon data collected from women who have been battered and especially from those who have been in contact with the police or other social service agencies, thus rendering the data uncertain. The second reason is that feminist theorists employ a single-variable analysis that concentrates on patriarchy and ignores the impact of factors such as income, unemployment, cohabiting and

age which may affect the perpetration of domestic violence which Johnson acknowledges as the social structural perspective.

Social Structural Explanations

The social structural perspective draws the attention away from the single-variable feminist perspective of patriarchy and instead focuses on the way social structures define men's roles as dominant. The perspective suggests that due to men's inability to fulfil these roles because of structural disadvantages such as unemployment, men cannot be breadwinners, leading to frustration and stresses which in turn lead to violence.

Other explanations that indicate economic stresses as the cause of domestic violence, at the outset, direct the attention to stresses derived from economic and social disadvantages. Thus it is claimed that such violence against wives was seen as primarily a lower-class phenomenon, as the lower classes are more susceptible to such pressures.

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) also recognised the role of stress in the aetiology of domestic violence and stated:

Economic conditions, low wages, bad housing, overcrowding and isolation: unfavourable and frustrating work conditions for men: lack of job opportunities for adolescents/school leavers and lack of facilities such as day care (eg nurseries), adequate transport, pleasant environment and play space and recreation facilities for mothers and children were considered to cause personal desperation that might precipitate violence in the home (BASW 406).

Goode (1971), in principle, agrees that life stresses are a causal factor of domestic violence as he acknowledges that violence is an ultimate resource used to derive power within a relationship. However, Goode goes one-step further by suggesting that not only life stresses cause domestic violence, but that there are links with socio-demographic positions. For instance, middle-class professional men can maintain power and control within their families by controlling the economic resources whereas these sources of power erode for working-class men when their female partners enter the labour force. Thus gender matters in cases of domestic violence may be linked to socio-economic inequality and from this perspective it is seen that both power differences between partners and socio-demographic positions influence propensities for violence (Goode 1971; Hornung et al 1981).

However, Kalmuss and Straus (1990) found discrepancies in the above research as they found men were more likely to engage in domestic violence where the woman was economically dependent solely on the man.

On reflection, although it may be possible for economic stresses to incite violence and stressful life events may distinguish families who are prone to domestic violence, it cannot be possible to rely solely on stresses as an explanation of abuse. Most social-economic/socio-demographically stressed men do not abuse their partners.

Another explanation of domestic violence that has been much researched and documented is that of learned behaviour which is sometimes known as the cycle of violence.

The Cycle of Violence

These well-documented studies show that domestic violence may occur when a child has been exposed to, witnessed or experienced domestic violence in their family origin. One such study carried out by Strauss et al (1979) found that there was a clear trend for violence in childhood to produce violence in adult life; Violence by parents begets violence in the next generation? Their study concluded that men who were born to violent families were 10 times more likely to hit their partners than those raised in non violent families. Similarly, Stacey and Shup (1983) also came to the same conclusion as their research determined that out of their sample, six out of ten perpetrators of domestic violence had witnessed physical violence by their parents and four out of ten had been physically abused by their parents.

Figure 1 Power and Control Wheel

Although the theory of the cycle of violence, sometimes better known as learned behaviour, is a popular one, a number of experts and academics have questioned its validity, and in particular the studies that are presented to support it. The main question concerns the empirical data put forward as evidence as it often relies upon self-reports from individual case histories and reports from service providers. Even if the data is provided from reliable sources, it is argued that the samples are too small and unrepresentative. The samples are based upon groups of people known either to be violent in some way or to be the victim of violence, whose backgrounds are then examined for evidence of violence in their families of origin.

Another problem facing these types of studies as I mentioned earlier is that there is no clear or consistent definition of domestic violence. When there is the definition it is often ambiguous and renders many studies inappropriate for comparative research.

A final point that I would like to reflect upon is the link between alcohol and domestic violence

Alcohol and Domestic Violence

The association between alcohol and domestic violence has been much studied and documented. However there is much disagreement about whether alcohol is a cause of domestic violence or just a contributing factor.

Widom (1989) believes alcohol is a cause of abuse as it impairs judgement, reduces inhibition and increases aggression. Further studies such as Gayford's produce further evidence regarding the link between alcohol and violence. His study shows that 52 per cent of his sample of women who had been abused by their partners stated that they were drunk at least once a week whilst 22 per cent indicated that violence only occurred when their partners had been drinking (Gayford 1978)

In contrast to the above, Larouch (1986) maintains that although alcohol may lower both awareness and self control, a person who uses it is still both responsible for drinking it and for their behaviour. If this is so, then people cannot be held responsible for what they do under the influence of alcohol. As a consequence, perpetrators of domestic violence could be partly excused for their actions and society could be seduced into accepting that the violence is the fault of the alcohol. If this happens then it could draw attention away from the fact that domestic violence is a crime and must be responded to as a crime.

Others argue that although alcohol is no doubt involved in some incidents of domestic violence

within the home, alcohol is also consumed in families where there is no abuse; in addition, all alcoholics are not violent. This side of the argument suggests that alcohol consumption is neither a necessary nor sufficient excuse for domestic violence.

Figure 2; (Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force, *Beyond These Walls*, 1988, pg. 345).

The Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force (1998) also recognises that excessive use of alcohol is often linked to domestic violence as indicated by figure 2

It maintains that it is more of a contributing factor rather than a causation of domestic violence.

Conclusion

In summing up, the explanations for the causes of domestic violence against women are varied. Some explanations seek the origin of the abuse such as patriarchy, some seek the issues in a broader social context within which violence takes place. Thus it does appear that there is no simple explanation for domestic violence against women. For instance, if we look towards socio-demographic explanations as the cause these might suggest that women should be more violent than men within the home as they have fewer life chances and fewer socio-economic resources from which they can derive power in relation to their partners.

The feminist explanation that men's violence, which is rooted in patriarchy, is the stand-alone cause of domestic violence is not acceptable as the data produced is open to interpretation and criticism because it only concentrates on one aspect of the cause of violence. Even the well-documented cycle of violence or violence as learned behaviour is criticised for relying too heavily on self-reports, which are often too small and unrepresentative, producing problematic data.

Even the most popular societal explanation of domestic violence, alcohol, cannot be used as a stand-alone causal factor, only as a contributing factor. However, whatever are the contributing factors, nothing can take away the seriousness of the crime. Indeed it is paramount that domestic violence is recognised as a crime and not left behind closed doors or considered the private matter many feel it should be. If this were to happen the actual amount of domestic violence that exists would not be known.

In conclusion, I believe, in order to understand domestic violence better, academics and theorists must work towards an integrated sociological theory of violence and abuse because the explanations of domestic violence are complex and certainly multi-factorial. American Psychiatric Association (1994) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed). Washington DC.