

experienced by young people and the elderly, heterosexual and LGBTQ couples, and people from different cultural backgrounds. We provide a theoretical understanding of the concepts underpinning different views of DFV, including the family system and structural feminist perspectives. We explore gender and power in private spaces as factors in shaping the problem, as well as the controversy over matters concerning causality, victimhood, and victimhood. We examine children's exposure to parental DFV, including how children can become enmeshed in parental violence, the impact it has on their short- and long-term safety, development, and wellbeing, and the role of child-centred responses. This book concludes with an illustration of strategies used to tackle the problem, including the role of prevention and examples of national and international good practice in working with those affected.

## The nature and prevalence of domestic and family violence

### Estimating prevalence rates: data challenges and other considerations

The way in which we define a social phenomenon has implications for how we define and measure its existence. If limiting the definition of DFV to physical and sexual abuse within intimate relationships, prevalence rates would be substantially lower than when expanding the definition to include non-physical behaviours, such as emotional, psychological, social and economic abuse. When identifying prevalence rates, it is therefore important to closely examine the definitions applied to describe the phenomenon being measured as well as the nature and diversity of target populations asked to self-report their experiences.

In addition to definition-related variations for prevalence rates of DFV, variations are also likely to be observed across different data sources. While administrative data (e.g. police, courts, or hospital data) provide us with "official statistics" around a certain social phenomenon (e.g. DFV) where it presents itself, this can be strongly impacted by the issue of underreporting. As a result, most global estimates of phenomena that are highly sensitive and often private in nature (such as DFV, sexual abuse, or child abuse) rely on self-report data to provide a more accurate estimate of prevalence.

Examples of self-report data used to estimate the extent of DFV across international jurisdictions include components of the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS), conducted in Australia, the US, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Mozambique, and a number of European countries (see, for example, Mouzos & Makkai, 2004; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2002). In addition, many countries conduct their own national population-based surveys. Examples include:

- The Australian Personal Safety Survey, which captures a diverse range of violent victimisation experiences, including DFV
- The British Crime Survey, which incorporates a component on DFV
- The German Prevalence Study on Violence against Women, which captures similar information to what has been gathered via the IVAWS instrument

Some of these surveys are administered repeatedly (e.g. the Australian Personal Safety Survey, which was conducted in 1996 as the Women's Safety Survey and in 2005, 2012, and 2016 as the amended Personal Safety Survey, further including men's experiences of violence and abuse). The purpose of such repeated waves of survey administration is to identify trends in social issues (e.g. DFV) and how these affect different populations over time.

Most population-based prevalence studies reveal similar prevalence rates of DFV across comparable populations. As an example, prevalence rates of physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated against women by a current or former partner range between 25% and 30% in each of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries surveyed as part of the IVAWS (Mouzos & Makkai, 2004), the European Union-wide survey (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2014), and the Australian Personal Safety Survey (ABS, 2014). This means that between one in three and one in four women experience intimate partner violence (IPV) in the form of physical and/or sexual abuse at some point from the age of 15 years. These national prevalence rates are in line with global estimations of IPV generated by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2013), which are estimated to be around 30%. This estimate is the average of prevalence rates identified across countries globally. Some countries have prevalence rates above 30% (the highest rates have been identified for some of the Southeast Asian, African, and Eastern Mediterranean regions, with up to 37%), whereas other regions have prevalence rates below 30% (e.g. high-income European and Western Pacific regions with 25%; WHO, 2013).

While rates of DFV may vary slightly depending on the social and cultural settings they are measured in, national and global estimates identify a clearly gendered pattern of victimisation experiences, which disproportionately affect women and children (WHO, 2013). However, researchers and men's rights activists who argue that DFV affects men and women equally (Beel, 2013; Straus, 1980) have frequently questioned the gendered nature of DFV. Given these polarising sides of the debate, it is important to critically examine and understand what the data reveal around gender symmetry versus gender imbalance in relation to experiences of DFV victimisation.

### Gender symmetry in DFV?

From a structural feminist perspective, DFV is seen as a gendered issue, informed by male patriarchy and female oppression. Within this framework, DFV is primarily a male-to-female perpetrated phenomenon, usually marked by the abuser's desire to strategically manipulate and control the victim (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Johnson, 2008; Stark, 2007). From a family conflict perspective, on the other hand, DFV is seen as a form of situational conflict associated with different individual and family factors, including financial and housing stress, parental disagreement around parenting practices, unemployment, poor

communication, and conflict resolution skills (Straus, 1973, 1980). Family conflict scholars argue that DFV may be used to establish or maintain status within the family structure or hierarchy but that the underlying objective is not to strategically control the victim (Straus, 1973, 1980). While feminist scholars argue that DFV is part of a pattern of manipulative and controlling behaviours, family conflict scholars argue that DFV is an expression of anger and frustration, which may occur as an isolated incident or as the frequent result of an argument (Johnson, 2008).

These opposing views have created tension between those advocating for either perspective. Family conflict scholars accuse feminist scholars of vilifying men, while feminist scholars criticise them for minimising the nature and impact of DFV on its victims (Keating, 2015). The ongoing debate, however, does not stop at the definition of DFV. Both theoretical perspectives hold very different views on the nature and extent of the phenomenon as well as its perpetrators. Scholars and practitioners aligning with the structural feminist perspective frame DFV as a primarily male-to-female perpetrated phenomenon, with women and children suffering the most detrimental physical, emotional, financial, and social impacts (Devries et al., 2013; Johnson, 2008). Those aligning with the family conflict perspective argue that women are equally as violent as men and that the prevailing gendered framework that informs policy and practice in most countries is misplaced and misleading (Beel, 2013).

Since the 1960s, most advocacy and awareness raising around the issue of DFV has been initiated and driven by second-wave feminism (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Yllö & Bograd, 1988). As such, DFV has been framed and addressed as a gendered issue in research, policy, and practice. Parallel to that, family conflict scholars have raised the idea of family conflict as a systems approach in which multiple players within the family system may be abusive, regardless of their gender (Straus, 1973).

Originally, the family conflict perspective primarily centred on exploring the contextual factors surrounding DFV. Over subsequent decades, it has moved towards an examination of victim and perpetrator roles and the promotion of gender symmetry in DFV (Keating, 2015). Supported by large-scale household survey data, advocates of the family conflict perspective argue that statistics indicate that women use violent tactics in their intimate relationships as often as – if not more often than – men (Beel, 2013; Straus, 1980, 2008, 2009). The late Murray Straus, one of the most vocal and well-known advocates of the gender symmetry debate, frequently argued that social survey data measuring couples' responses to conflict, anger, and frustration reveal that women use violence against a male intimate partner at the same rate as men do against a female intimate partner (Straus, 2008, 2009). While most scholars like Straus make admissions around the impact of DFV, acknowledging that women are more likely to experience manipulation and injuries, some proponents of the gender symmetry framework further deny this imbalance (Beel, 2013). In his review of the literature and data surrounding DFV from family conflict and structural feminist perspectives, Beel

(2013) argues that there is substantial empirical evidence which demonstrates that male victims of DFV are equally as likely to require medical attention when experiencing DFV (Heady, Scott, & DeVaus, 1999, as cited in Beel, 2013) and that equal numbers of men and women experience control as part of the abuse (Ross & Babcock, 2009, as cited in Beel, 2013). He purports that feminist scholars have been misleading in defining DFV as a gendered issue anchored in male patriarchy and gender inequality and, as a result, have created not only a bias in social science research but also a policy and practice landscape that denies male victims their right to suitable services (Beel, 2013). From a structural feminist perspective, the argument has always been the opposite. Beginning with Dobash and Dobash (1979), well-known work framing "a case against the patriarchy" in the late 1970s and followed by many other (male and female) feminist scholars, DFV has primarily been identified as a male-to-female perpetrated problem. A large number of studies, including population-based surveys as well as those drawing their findings from higher risk, clinical samples have repeatedly confirmed a gendered pattern in the experience of DFV (Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety [ANROWS], 2017; Keating, 2015; Mouzos & Makkai, 2004). The WHO has repeatedly labelled male-to-female perpetrated violence a global public health issue of endemic proportions (Garcia-Moreno & Watts, 2011).

National and international homicide statistics show that women are three to five times more likely to be killed by an intimate partner than men (Beel, 2013; Keating, 2015; Bryant & Cussen, 2015). The most recent edition of Australia's national prevalence study of DFV conducted in 2016 revealed that women were more than three times more likely to experience physical or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner than men (ANROWS, 2017). US findings derived from a recent reanalysis of the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey revealed a smaller gender gap but still supported the gendered nature of the issue, with one in four women reporting severe physical abuse by a partner of the opposite sex, compared to one in seven men (Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013). The gender gap in experiences of IPV appears to be smaller in general in US data. While US-based domestic homicide statistics also support the gendered nature of DFV, the overrepresentation of women in domestic homicide statistics is slightly lower in the US than in a number of other Western countries (Beel, 2013).

Findings derived from a number of national and global prevalence studies have repeatedly contradicted the argument of gender symmetry put forward by advocates of the family conflict perspective (see, for example, Straus, 2007, 2009). National and global prevalence studies are not subject to limitations associated with research designs employing high-risk clinical samples (e.g. overrepresentation of a wide range of severe and repeat experiences of DFV in high-risk populations often captured in clinical samples). Indeed, respondents to large-scale prevalence surveys are randomly selected and the experiences and perceptions of men and women equally represent those of the broader

population. These studies therefore cover a range of individuals and their experiences in past or current intimate relationships. The clear overrepresentation of women in all areas of violent experiences involving a perpetrator of the opposite sex across national and global prevalence studies lends strong support to the structural feminist argument that DFV is an issue that affects women disproportionately.

### ***Is there a way of reconciling the argument?***

The significant discrepancies in evidence that both sides of the debate draw on in support of their argument beg the question as to whether there is any common ground between the two perspectives. It seems the closest these two perspectives come to sharing a common ground in their arguments is that some family conflict scholars acknowledge the greater vulnerability of female victims with regards to injuries (Beel, 2013; Straus, 2008), although some negate this observation (Heady et al., 1999). Both sides argue that the opposing perspective generates its findings through biased or flawed sampling designs, which lead to either an alleged overrepresentation of male-to-female perpetrated violence (family conflict argument) or an alleged misinterpretation of female use of violence that is taken out of context (structural feminist argument). Feminist scholars argue that women's admissions of violent tactics in surveys are meaningless unless examined within the situational context in which they occur (Keating, 2015). That is, is women's violence being used as a form of resistance or self-defence? Does the violence being used generate the same impact as the violence being used by a male against a female? Are patterns of control being accounted for? Without addressing these questions, it is difficult to determine whether the gender symmetry observed in some studies reflects genuinely equal experiences of violence and conflict in intimate relationships (Keating, 2015; Kimmel, 2002).

The body of international research evidence shows that female victims of DFV are significantly overrepresented, especially with regard to severe physical violence, including presentation to emergency room departments for DFV-related injuries and domestic homicide (Bryant & Cussen, 2015; Garcia-Moreno & Watts, 2011; Keating, 2015). These observations support the argument that women are disproportionately affected by the experiences and consequences of DFV over the life course. Rather than arguing for one extreme or the other in this debate, it is important to address the needs arising from the gendered pattern of DFV while also acknowledging that men, too, experience violence at the hands of an intimate partner. While research suggests that violence is more likely to be perpetrated by a male than female partner (Walters et al., 2013; University of New South Wales, 2013), these findings still highlight that men need to be considered in practice responses addressing the needs of those affected by DFV. We further examine the role of gender in victimisation experiences in Chapters 3 and 7.

### The shift from “family conflict” and “wife beating” towards more inclusive definitions

As stated early on in this chapter, estimating the nature and extent of a problem, such as DFV, is further informed by how we define the issue at hand along with the relationships in which it occurs. Historically, DFV was seen as a private matter that took place behind closed family doors. Early work in defining and examining DFV included perspectives around family conflict as well as gender. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) early book, *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family*, for example, focused on DFV from a family perspective and included parental violence as well as child and sibling abuse in its examination and definition of the issue.

The women’s movement, on the other hand, has driven the development of more gender-based approaches to understanding and defining DFV, including Dobash and Dobash’s (1979) pioneer work, *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against the Patriarchy*. Under early feminist or gender-based frameworks, DFV was often referred to as “wife abuse” or “spousal abuse”, setting clear margins for the phenomenon as something which occurs in opposite sex, marital relationships and is male-to-female perpetrated. Feminists documented the widespread occurrences of what police often referred to as “wife beating” throughout the 1970s (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). It was the feminist – or women’s – movement that highlighted DFV as a social issue that occurred across social classes. This movement also highlighted the need for adequate crisis responses, including criminal justice responses and access to crisis accommodation for “battered wives” (Clark, 2011). With the change in nature of intimate relationships over time, definitions have evolved to reflect a more diverse range of relationships and a greater awareness of the pervasiveness of DFV.

### Contemporary definitions of DFV

When seeking to define DFV, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the plethora of definitions of this phenomenon. To start with, several labels are used interchangeably to describe DFV, including domestic violence, family violence, and IPV. While these may all capture the same behaviours in one context, they may actually refer to different things. A common example is the term “family violence”. While it is often used to refer to violence between couples or parents in some settings, in other settings this term may include a wider variety of behaviours, such as child abuse and violence directed at extended family members. It is therefore important to clarify the types of behaviours and relationships included under a relevant definition of DFV, to gain clarity around the context and extent of the behaviour. Throughout this book, we use an inclusive definition of DFV, informed by the approach taken by the United Nations (UN) and WHO. Both organisations highlight the importance of understanding DFV as a gendered phenomenon that – while not exclusively male-to-female perpetrated – affects

women and children disproportionately (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015; WHO, 2013). In addition, both highlight the need to understand DFV as behaviours that reach far beyond physical and sexual abuse. Their definitions include physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and economic forms of abuse (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015; WHO, 2013). Aside from specifying certain behaviours as abusive, definitions of DFV may further include the impact of such behaviour. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), for example, describes DFV as behaviours designed to intimidate, control, or manipulate a family member, partner, or former partner (ABS, 2013). Where definitions of DFV are quite broad, they may include any of the following behaviours:

- Physical assault and abuse
- Sexual assault and abuse
- Psychological abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Verbal abuse
- Economic abuse
- Social abuse and isolation
- Property damage
- Harassment or stalking
- Spiritual abuse
- Cultural abuse
- Threats of any of the above behaviours to coerce victims into submission and compliance

Some of these behaviours may appear to be similar in their definitional approach. Take, for example, psychological abuse and emotional abuse. One may argue that behaviours such as blaming the victim for relationship problems can be classified as emotional as well as psychological abuse. While there is no official distinction between the definition of emotional versus psychological abuse, some argue that psychological abuse involves “manipulative behaviour to coerce, control or harm” someone (ABS, 2013, p. 10). The key difference may therefore lie in the element of manipulation. Emotional abuse encapsulates a number of hurtful behaviours, such as putting the victim down and/or undermining their self-esteem. This in itself may not necessarily require a conscious element of manipulation or coercion, whereas “playing mind games”, “gaslighting”,<sup>1</sup> questioning the victim’s ability to parent, or causing the victim to question his/her ability to move on without the abusive partner are strategies to generate and maintain power and control over the victim.

While detailed definitions as the ones offered above may seem to “double up” on capturing different aspects of DFV, they fulfil a particular purpose. Broad definitions help to ensure that any harmful behaviour, no matter how major or minor it may seem to the victim, perpetrator, or people outside the interpersonal

relationship, is captured and understood in a way that facilitates a relevant service response. This applies to responses by victim support services, perpetrator interventions, and primary prevention approaches. For the purpose of providing victim support services, for example, definitions benefit from being broad and in-depth to illustrate to victims that a number of behaviours they may be exposed to are not acceptable, even if the victim has not questioned the wrongness of this behaviour up until the point of service provision.

When responding to perpetrators of DFV, service responses designed to deliver behaviour change and educational programs equally benefit from applying a broad definition to incorporate and address any harmful behaviour, no matter how minor it may seem to the program participants at the time. The same applies to definitions in the context of primary prevention. Educational and awareness-raising campaigns benefit from incorporating a diverse number of harmful behaviours in their definition of DFV to illustrate to the target population that even “minor” forms of these behaviours can have a detrimental impact on the victim’s wellbeing and can escalate into more severe forms of abuse over time.

For the purpose of this book, we therefore adopt a broad definition of behaviours designed to coerce, manipulate, or control a victim of DFV. We include current and former intimate partner relationships, extended family relationships, and parent–adult child relationships. Extended family relationships are included due to their cultural relevance in some jurisdictions, e.g. among Australia’s Indigenous family networks and communities, and their recognition under relevant protection legislations (Phillips & Vandenberg, 2014). We do not include parent–child relationships where the abuse is directed at minor children (i.e. children under the age of 18). While this form of abuse is at times classified under family violence in the international (primarily North American) literature, it is more commonly referred to as child maltreatment and treated under a separate legislative framework across a number of jurisdictions. The impact of DFV on children is more commonly discussed in the context of exposure to parental DFV from a research, policy, and practice perspective (Kauken, Powers, & Meyer, 2016; Richards, 2011), which we explore in Chapter 6. While the primary focus of this book is on DFV in the form of IPV in line with the prevailing research evidence (Phillips & Vandenberg, 2014; WHO, 2013), we address cultural diversity in Chapter 8 and gender, age, and relationship diversity among victims and perpetrators in Chapter 7.

### Defining DFV as a crime: what are the challenges?

Despite attempts to criminalise DFV and/or some of its inherent behaviours across a number of jurisdictions, challenges remain around the legislative framework and service responses required to operationalise DFV as criminal behaviour (Douglas, 2008). Labelling DFV as a crime has increasingly been used in public awareness campaigns to highlight the wrongdoing associated with these behaviours and to discourage public tolerance towards perpetrators. While some

jurisdictions have one or more offence categories relating specifically to DFV, others may only criminalise behaviour that in and of itself constitutes a crime under a relevant criminal code. A number of countries have DFV-specific legislation that applies at a federal level, such as the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 (originally the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)) in the US, the *Opferschutzgesetz* (Victim Protection Legislation) in Germany (Bundesministerium fuer Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2017), and the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 in the UK (Graca, 2017). In addition, some jurisdictions have state-level legislation addressing DFV, while others, such as Australia, address DFV from a civil or criminal perspective via individual state and territory legislation (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2010). In addition to challenges arising from state versus federal level legislation addressing the issue of DFV, some legislation further distinguishes between civil and criminal matters associated with DFV. The Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, for example, specifies civil law responses to DFV, as does the state and territory legislation informing Australia’s response. The UK Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004, on the other hand, was designed to address both criminal and civil matters related to DFV. However, its implementation faced challenges, with the Act primarily addressing the civil law needs of victims of DFV in its early stages (Graca, 2017). More recent law reforms in the UK have contributed to a greater utilisation of this legislation in relation to criminal law, in line with its initial intentions.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to unpack the nature and associated challenges around different civil and criminal DFV-related legislation, it is important to understand that the definition of a certain behaviour as a crime has implications for possible law enforcement responses. Unless a certain behaviour defined as DFV more broadly has also been defined as a criminal offence under relevant legislation, the only recourse available to victims and those responding to experiences of victimisation (such as law enforcement agencies) are civil remedies, such as the issuing of civil protection orders (also referred to as restraining orders in some jurisdictions) (Douglas, 2008). While civil remedies can be important safety measures for victims of DFV, they do not offer avenues of criminal prosecution of the behaviour. To illustrate this, we use the following example. The behaviours listed below were defined as DFV earlier on in this chapter and have also been defined under a number of policies and legislation:

- Physical or sexual abuse
- Emotional or psychological abuse
- Economic abuse
- Threats or coercion
- Control and domination that creates fear for the victims’ safety or wellbeing
- Property damage
- Animal abuse and threats thereof
- Unauthorised surveillance and stalking

However, not all of these behaviours necessarily constitute a criminal offence against property or a person, which therefore restricts the nature of available criminal justice responses. While in some cases, acting on physical abuse, sexual abuse, vandalism, or stalking may be straightforward for police, criminal justice responses to other types of DFV can be much more complicated and, in some instances, impossible. Two examples of recent legislative reforms to criminalise specific DFV behaviours include the criminalisation of non-lethal strangulation in the context of DFV in Australia in 2016 (Criminal Law (Domestic Violence) Amendment Act, 2016) and the criminalisation of coercive control in the context of DFV in the UK in 2016 (Graca, 2017). While it is early days for both legislation changes, researchers have already been alerted to some of the challenges associated with translating these laws into practice (Douglas, 2008; Graca, 2017).

#### **Non-lethal strangulation and DFV in Australia**

Non-lethal strangulation is increasingly being identified as a high-risk behaviour in DFV cases (Queensland Health, 2017). This form of abusive behaviour is frequently used by perpetrators as means of maintaining power and control over the victim by demonstrating that the perpetrator has the power to end the victim's life in an instant (Strack, McClane, & Hawley, 2001; Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2014). Taking Australia, for example, Queensland has been the first jurisdiction to acknowledge the severe and pervasive nature of this abusive behaviour by creating a law that allows police to charge perpetrators with the DFV-specific offence of non-lethal strangulation. While previously often dismissed as "choking" or "smothering", the new law encourages police (along with the general public) to think differently about a behaviour that may not necessarily leave immediate physical marks but poses substantial short- and long-term risk to victims' brain and cardiovascular functioning (Douglas & Fitzgerald, 2014). However, researchers have highlighted that it is important that an increase in charges further translates into an increase in prosecutions at the same rate to ensure that legislation changes translate into practice at all tiers of the criminal justice system.

#### **Coercive control and DFV in the UK**

Coercive control has been identified as a key feature in DFV behaviour used to manipulate and intimidate victims into submission and compliance (Stark, 2007). While coercive control is frequently observed in abusive relationships marked by a range of DFV behaviours, including more severe forms of physical and sexual violence, many victims experience coercive control without necessarily experiencing physical or sexual abuse. Yet, the manipulative nature of this type of behaviour creates ongoing fear and anxiety in victims, which can have a detrimental impact on short- and long-term psychological wellbeing (Stark, 2007). Acknowledging the severe impact on victims exposed to this form of

abuse, and in an attempt to offer victims greater protection from what can be "invisible" forms of abuse, the UK introduced the offence of "coercive and controlling behaviour in intimate and family relationships" under the Serious Crimes Act 2015 (Graca, 2017). While such an introduction of legislation acknowledges the insidious nature of coercive and controlling behaviour in intimate and family relationships and sends a public message of intolerance of DFV, even in the absence of physical abuse, such a law comes with its own implementation challenges. One particular challenge arises from the often invisible nature of coercive control and the power it holds over its victims. While perpetrators may leave no visible marks that can be useful in facilitating the policing and prosecuting of DFV, they tend to strategically manipulate and intimidate their victims into silence when coming in contact with external support sources (Stark, 2007; Johnson, 2008).

#### **Summary**

In this chapter, we examined the challenges associated with defining DFV, including its nature and extent across different social settings. We unpacked different factors relating to how DFV is defined from a social and legal (or criminal justice) perspective (including the challenges associated with defining DFV as a crime). The gendered nature of DFV, along with its contested views around the construction of DFV as family conflict versus gendered oppression and abuse, was addressed. Throughout this chapter, we highlighted the extent to which definitions of DFV and their measurement affect how we estimate prevalence rates. We discussed the historical shift in different definitions, including the shift from terms such as "wife beating" towards more contemporary and inclusive definitions of DFV. This chapter provides the foundation for our examinations of the origins and contributing factors of DFV, its impact on victims and children, the accountability of those using violence in intimate and family relationships, and the role of different theoretical, practice, and policy responses examined throughout this book.

#### **Note**

- 1 Gaslighting is commonly understood as practices used by perpetrators of DFV to cause the victim to start questioning their sanity (e.g. by purposely misplacing or hiding items belonging to the victim, such as car keys, or remotely switching electronic devices on or off).

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## Chapter 3

# Theoretical strands

## The usefulness of theory and a theory of usefulness

### How theory helps

Theory assists any practical endeavour by directing attention to what is important and by suggesting what can be done about it. When investigating concerns about the safety of family members affected by domestic and family violence (DFV), for instance, information needs to be gathered to help understand and determine the type and level of risk involved and how that risk might be minimised. More particularly, theory offers guidance, directing our actions by means of:

- Observation – what to notice and what to look for
- Description – helping to make sense of and arrange observations into an explanatory framework
- Explanation – extending this framework into an account of how events are linked
- Prediction – determining what is likely to happen next
- Intervention – establishing what can be done to effect change

As student, practitioner, or policymaker, you need to be able to engage with theory and fashion it into a set of tools that can be used to conceptualise, assess, and respond to DFV. You have to be able to evaluate the relative usefulness of competing theories for practice based on a critical analysis of their performance in the practice setting. For practitioners, then, and the agencies that employ them, the “proof of the pudding” is in how theories reflect experience in practice. You might decide that some theory fits some aspects of your work better than others. In this chapter, we consider the usefulness to DFV practice of theory in general and of certain theories in particular.

### But which theory? Determining utility for the practice field

The DFV field is complex. It combines multiple issues and involves a range of persons and groups, including a wide range of community and government agencies



"This book, intended for students and practitioners, will be extremely valuable to each of these audiences. However, it also has the potential to reach other audiences both policy makers and academic. It is clear, accessible and incisive in its coverage of the complex issues surrounding domestic violence. The authors do not shy away from the hotly contested debates within this field but work through them for and with the reader. As a result, it offers the reader a refreshingly honest critical appreciation of what is known, what is yet to be known, and what might be doable as a consequence. Anyone interested in domestic family violence will learn much from it."

*Professor Sandra Walklate, Eleanor Rathbone  
Chair of Sociology, University of Liverpool, UK*

"Meyer and Frost have created a book that provides a refreshing look at domestic and family violence. The authors address head on the tensions and challenges that exist in current theorising and practice approaches, and provide effective strategies for addressing domestic and family violence. The result is a book that is comprehensive and holistic. It is a must read for domestic and family violence professionals, educators, researchers and students."

*Dr Yvonne Crichton-Hill, Senior Lecturer, Department of Human  
Services and Social Work, University of Canterbury, New Zealand*

"This book is as scholarly as it is practical. Administration and practitioners alike will find this book accessible, informative, and thought provoking. It will undoubtedly be an important resource that will serve as a guide to our efforts to reduce domestic and family violence."

*Dr Jayson Ware, Group Director, Offender Services & Program  
Corrective Services New South Wales, Department of Justice, Australia*

"Given the expansive, complex, and multi-faceted literature of this field, this book contributes a much-needed summary and reformulation of our current knowledge and best understanding of domestic and family violence. It is brilliantly organized to enable readers to find given subjects of interest, while conveying a sensitive 'inside' portrayal of victimhood and perpetratorhood alike."

*Jerry L. Jennings, Ph.D., Vice President of Clinical Services,  
Liberty Healthcare Corporation, Pennsylvania, USA*

"This book is very timely for practitioners, educators and students who need a critical yet reflective approach to responding to domestic and family violence. Importantly the book shows constructive ways to respond to perpetrators and victims. It highlights the need for a gendered approach as well as extending to other occurrences of violence such as in same sex relationships and those living with a disability. I fully recommend this book as a practical and thoughtful guide to this complex field of practice."

*Patrick O'Leary, Professor of Social Work, Griffith Criminology  
Institute, School of Human Services and Social Work,  
Griffith University, Australia*

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# Domestic and Family Violence

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## A Critical Introduction to Knowledge and Practice

Silke Meyer and Andrew Frost

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