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*VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN* 2007; 13; 874  
DOI: 10.1177/1077801207304806

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# Understanding the Complexities of Feminist Perspectives on Woman Abuse

## A Commentary on Donald G. Dutton's *Rethinking Domestic Violence*

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All books, including Donald G. Dutton's (2006) *Rethinking Domestic Violence*, are written and published in a specific political and economic context. As vividly described by Faludi (1991), Hammer (2002), and many others who made progressive contributions to an interdisciplinary understanding of the enduring discrimination against contemporary North American women, we still live in a climate characterized by vitriolic attacks on feminist scholarship, practice, and activism intended to secure women's basic human rights (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2003; Stanko, 2006).

Despite its title, Dutton's new book does not focus on rethinking domestic violence. Instead, it is another example of the conservative backlash against feminism in general and feminist research on woman abuse in particular, a response that "helps to veil the extent and brutality of this problem and to block efforts to deal with it" (Hammer, 2002, p. 5). Dutton's preoccupation with feminism is reflected in entire chapters dedicated to criticizing feminist theory and research and the book's "bottom line" summary, where half of the main points concern Dutton's interpretation of feminism rather than new insights about domestic violence research. Accordingly, the main objective of this commentary is to respond to some of Dutton's criticisms of feminist inquiry and practice.

### "Old Wine in New Bottles": Dutton's Critique of Feminism

Like his arguments for marginalizing the consideration of gender in the etiology of violence, many, if not most, of Dutton's criticisms of feminism are dated. For

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**Authors' Note:** The authors would like to thank Edward G. Gondolf and Claire Renzetti for their helpful comments and criticisms.

example, we see claims that (a) women are as violent as men in intimate relationships, (b) feminist research is political and, therefore, invalid, (c) feminists offer single-factor explanations of woman abuse, (d) feminists ignore or deny women's use of violence, and (e) feminists strongly support ineffective mandatory arrest and prosecution policies. Readers might guess that the book was occasioned by the astronomical growth of feminist research on woman abuse. However, its references to recent feminist work are few and far between. Therefore, we will fill in the blanks regarding what the feminist research says about these issues.

### **Women Are as Violent as Men**

To support this claim, Dutton heavily relies on data derived from renditions of the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS), originally developed by Murray Straus (1979). For those who have used the CTS or who have examined data gleaned by them, it may seem painfully obvious but worth stating again: They ignore the contexts, meanings, and motives of both men's and women's violence. As has been repeatedly stated, unless researchers can accurately determine why women use physical violence against men, it is irresponsible to contend, as Dutton does, that "in Canada and the United States, women use violence in intimate relationships to the same extent as men, for the same reasons, and with largely the same results" (p. ix).

To reach these conclusions, Dutton and other proponents of sexual symmetry artificially narrow the definition of violence between intimates to obscure injurious behaviors that display marked sexual asymmetry, such as sexual assault, strangulation, separation assault, stalking, and homicide. Rather than an unacceptable or hysterical broadening of the definition of violence, these behaviors are commonly part of abused women's experience. Like others who assert that women are as violent as men (e.g., Straus, 2006), Dutton downplays research on these forms of violence. Moreover, he pays little attention to differentiating between defensive and offensive forms of violence between intimates, a courtesy we extend to victims of other crimes (DeKeseredy, 2006).

To make claims about the symmetry of violence between intimate partners, one must also conflate sex and gender. Discussions of prevalence that rely on the variables "male" and "female" cannot tell us much about gender, the socially constructed and normative set of meanings attached to these categories. This distinction is one of the primary contributions of feminist perspectives to the social sciences. Research that asks perpetrators and survivors about the nature of violence between intimates finds that both say much about gender. For example, violent men talk about threats to their masculinity experienced when women or men fail to demonstrate adequate respect for them, whereas women talk about the normative gender expectations that abusers use to justify their violence (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2002; Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1998; Eisikovits, Goldblatt, & Winstok, 1999; Gilligan, 1997, 2001; Hearn, 1998; Rudd, Dobos, Vogl-Bauer, & Beatty, 1997).

Dutton's claim that "mainstream governments came to support domestic violence policy based on radical feminism" (p. 153) is also dubious. For example, the 1999 and 2004 General Social Surveys conducted by Statistics Canada focus on violence against women and men in intimate relationships and generated sexually symmetrical CTS data.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Statistics Canada has moved away from developing feminist surveys of violence against women and is currently being influenced by political forces guided by fathers' rights groups and others with a vested interest in minimizing the pain and suffering caused by male-to-female abuse (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Note, too, that on October 3, 2006, Bev Oda, federal minister for the Status of Women Canada (SWC), announced that women's organizations would no longer be eligible for funding for advocacy, government lobbying, or research projects. Furthermore, SWC was required to delete the word *equality* from its list of goals (Carastathis, 2006). So much for Dutton's claim that "women's rights have finally been acknowledged after centuries of religion-based political repression" (p. ix).

### **Feminism is a Political Agenda**

Dutton accuses feminists of "dogma preservation" (p. ix), of "politically conceptualizing" domestic violence (p. xi), and of attempting to "spin" data to be consistent with their "paradigm" (p. 349). Other similar antifeminist claims scattered throughout his book could easily be listed here, but the most important point to consider here is that, as is the case with his recent coauthored critique of the Duluth model of batterer intervention (see Dutton & Corvo, 2006), Dutton tries to create an "us versus them" scenario in which he and those who support his views are objective scientists pursuing the truth, whereas feminists, at best, only pay lip service to rigorous empirical work.

Although conspicuously absent from the book, scores of feminist studies (both qualitative and quantitative) have been conducted since Dobash and Dobash published their path-breaking feminist analysis of wife beating in 1979, including more recent work by the same authors (Dobash, 2003; Dobash & Dobash, 1998, 2004). Many are published in journals that meet the highest disciplinary standards, such as *Violence and Victims*, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, and *Violence Against Women*. Also, books presenting data generated by feminist researchers are published by Oxford University Press, Rutgers University Press, and University of Toronto Press. Feminists' scholarship is subjected to the same standards of rigorous peer review as other work and is clearly not published simply because of feminists' empirical, theoretical, or political perspectives. We can only hypothesize why Dutton did not cite many feminist studies in this book, but given the tone of his criticisms, one possible explanation is that he has contempt for feminist inquiry. Another possible reason is that he is simply not familiar with the literature he allegedly critiques.

As feminists, we have no problem being labeled *political*. After all, as Sartre (1964) reminds us, "all writing is political" (p. 29), and we hope that our work will help

reduce much pain and suffering. Moreover, we, like many other contemporary social scientists, contend that no scientific method, theory, or policy proposal is value free. Nor are the theories, methods, and policies advanced by Dutton. For example, by denouncing feminist approaches and advancing psychological work, Dutton is engaged in a process of activism and is trying to advance his own political agenda, as he and Corvo (2006) do in their attack on the Duluth model and attempt to replace it with their own clinical one that is also described in *Rethinking Domestic Violence* (Gondolf, in press).

In what is still one of the most widely read and cited social scientific articles in the world, Howard Becker (1967) asks scholars, "Whose side are we on?" Although Dutton attempts to paint feminists as "ideologues" and portray himself as an objective scientist, in reality he is advancing a political agenda that supports the goals and claims of fathers' rights groups and other conservative political movements determined to diminish the severity of male-to-female abuse (Gondolf, in press). Most feminist scholars, on the other hand, put their politics up front for all to scrutinize and are committed to putting gender at the forefront of research, theory construction, and policy development.

Still, people lacking knowledge of feminist inquiry might get the impression from reading Dutton's chapter 5 that feminists are hostile to "men in general" (p. x). Nothing can be further from the truth. The goal of feminist work on crime and justice is "not to push men out so as to pull women in, but rather to gender the study of crime and criminal justice" (Renzetti, 1993, p. 232). In other words, feminist approaches to violence and abuse seek to add salient factors into research rather than demanding that consideration of entire socially significant categories be eliminated. Furthermore, as pointed out later in this commentary, it is erroneous to paint all feminists who study and/or do political work to end woman abuse with the same brush.

## Single-Factor Explanations of Woman Abuse

According to Dutton,

The claim from a feminist analytical perspective, therefore is twofold: that society is patriarchal and that the use of violence to maintain male patriarchy is accepted. This feminist argument indicates patriarchy as a direct cause of wife assault rather than an inducement that interacts with other causes. (p. 97)

Scholars familiar with the extant literature on the relationship between gender and violence do not have to be reminded that there is more than one "feminist analytical perspective" on woman abuse and that there have been many new theoretical developments since the offerings cited by Dutton to support his claim (e.g., Bograd, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1979). For example, there is now a large feminist literature combining both macro- and micro-level factors, such as unemployment, globalization,

deindustrialization, life events stress, intimate relationship status, familial and societal patriarchy, substance use, male peer support, and other factors. Regardless of what influenced him to exclude major contemporary feminist perspectives, his book reflects an inadequate understanding of feminist theories.

Even so, Dutton provides an in-depth overview of major psychological contributions to the field, and many people would contend that feminists should attempt to integrate some of the perspectives cited in his book with their analyses of how gender and other sociocultural forces influence rape, beatings, stalking, psychological abuse, and the like. Following what Gondolf (in press) suggests in his response to Dutton and Corvo (2006), we do need to broaden the discourse and debate among researchers and practitioners (p. 13). Nevertheless, some of the key points made by Dutton are similar to those made by him and Corvo in the sense that they “appear more to circumvent a major part of the field” (Gondolf, in press) that he deems hostile to his ideological position.

### **Feminists Ignore Women’s Use of Violence**

According to Dutton, “Women are never violent except in self-defense” is one of the “bedrock beliefs in feminist theory” (p. 98). This is inaccurate. Feminist scholars have been at the forefront of research on women’s and girls’ use of violence. For example, the journal *Violence Against Women* published a three-part special issue titled “Women’s Use of Violence in Intimate Relationships” in 2002 and 2003 (Volume 8, Numbers 11 and 12; Volume 9, Number 1). Moreover, the same journal published another relevant issue titled “Intimate Partner Violence: Debates and Future Directions” (Volume 12, Number 13) that also focused on women’s use of violence. And in their work since 1979, feminists such as Dobash and Dobash (2004) have gathered data on women’s use of violence and have attempted to theorize this problem. Swan and Snow (2006) offer another example of such theoretical work.

What about government interest in the topic? According to Dutton,

What has occurred in North American governments at national and local levels has been a simplistic conceptualization of intimate partner violence (IPV) that has resulted in a denial of violence against men and also of bilateral complicity in violent couples. (p. x)

However, the U.S. national government has expressed great interest in women’s violence and an awareness of multiple positions and debates within the field. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) organized a workshop on gender symmetry in 2000. As stated by its organizer, Leora Rosen (2006),

In selecting participants for this workshop, our goal was not just to bring to the table those who had historically been on opposite sides of the debate and initiate dialogue between them but also to seek out some middle ground or new ground—for example,

approaches that considered variations in the manifestation and etiology of IPV. We hope to encourage theoretical developments that would improve our understanding of all manifestations of IPV and move the field forward. The workshop covers three critical topic areas: (a) a typology of violence, (b) measurement issues, and (c) women's use of violence. (p. 1000)

Much of what was said at the workshop was recorded, edited, and posted on the NIJ (2000) Web site "to serve as a guide for prospective applicants planning to submit proposals on this topic" (Rosen, 2006, p. 1000). Moreover, papers commissioned for the workshop were published in one of the above special issues of *Violence Against Women* (Volume 12, Number 13). If Dutton had been aware of the Web site and had taken the time to read the materials posted there and published in the special issue, he would have discovered that the feminist and nonfeminist scholars who attended the workshop were deeply committed to enhancing a rich empirical and theoretical understanding of women's use of violence.

### **Feminists Strongly Support Ineffective Mandatory Arrest and Prosecution Policies**

This assertion is similar to Linda Mills's (2003) argument. Ironically, Dutton begins chapter 12, titled "The Failure of Criminal Justice Intervention," by citing a passage in James Q. Wilson's (1985) book *Thinking About Crime* and acknowledges Wilson in the preface for helping to "shape" his "thinking about the limits of legal policy" (p. xii). The irony is that Dutton is a strong advocate of treatment, whereas Wilson is a fierce proponent of law-and-order solutions to crime. In fact, like others referred to by critical criminologist Jock Young (1986) as either administrative criminologists or right realists, Wilson is fundamentally opposed to treatment. For him, to adequately control crime, policy makers should develop solutions based on the "radical individualistic" writings of Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham. Like these classical criminologists, and unlike Dutton, who is committed to doing theoretical work, Wilson does not offer a formal theory of crime. In fact, for him, the search for "root causes is a useless endeavor because a free society can do little about attacking these root causes so that a concern for their elimination becomes little more than an excuse for doing nothing" (p. 6). Rather, Wilson asserts that we should devote all of our energy to improving the ability of the criminal justice system to deter people from committing crimes.

Still, Wilson (1985) does offer elements of a causal theory, one that views crime as a function of inadequate control. Wilson assumes that all people are both free willed and predisposed to committing crimes. He also contends that punishment—not treatment—should be used to deter crime and that punishment should be proportional to the severity of the crime committed. Furthermore, he asserts that swift and certain penalties are more effective than draconian punishments. Given that Wilson is opposed to treatment and strongly supports law-and-order strategies, we can only speculate how

Wilson influenced Dutton's thinking about legal policy. The key thing their respective work has in common is that it dismisses or ignores the gendered nature of crime.

Of course, some feminists strongly support aggressive criminal justice approaches to dealing with woman abuse, seeking increased enforcement of existing laws and harsher penalties for convicted batterers. Feminists in the battered women's movement fought legal battles and undertook consciousness raising to ensure that women who did seek assistance from the police would receive equal protection of the law, regardless of whether the perpetrator was a current or former intimate partner. Nevertheless, this is only part of the picture. Feminists have also been at the forefront of efforts to create holistic non-criminal justice responses to violence against women. INCITE! (2003), a self-identified "national activist organization of radical feminists of color," took the lead in calling for the consideration of multiple related factors contributing to violence against women and men. Their joint statement with Critical Resistance "against gender violence and the prison industrial complex" says,

It is critical that we develop responses to gender violence that do not depend on a sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic criminal justice system. It is also important that we develop strategies that challenge the criminal justice system and that also provide safety for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. To live violence-free lives, we must develop holistic strategies for addressing violence that speak to the intersection of all forms of oppression.

Even if a handful of 1970s versions of radical feminism could be characterized as "single-factor" approaches because of their emphasis on patriarchy as the root form of oppression, statements such as this clearly demonstrate that contemporary feminisms cannot. INCITE! and the more than 145 individuals and organizations who signed their statement on violence against women and the prison industrial complex share many of Dutton's misgivings about criminal justice approaches, although for different reasons. These feminists argue that mandatory arrest laws appear to have done more to protect batterers than survivors of violence. They also point out that law-and-order approaches to violence are ill suited to the needs of a diverse range of marginalized women (e.g., women of color, poor women, lesbians) who have historically been inadequately served by police intervention.

In addition, these progressives argue that prison and other punitive approaches cannot truly prevent violence against women. And they resist the professionalization of antiviolence work that has pulled efforts away from grassroots organizing toward depoliticized bureaucracy to secure funding for their work (INCITE!, 2003). This is where the variety of diverse feminist positions on violence against women, men, and children converge and diverge from Dutton. Feminists, including those involved in drafting the Violence Against Women Act and other laws on violence against women, have always asserted that broad-based social change is imperative for the prevention of violence. They reject the idea that individual psychological counseling is adequate to this task.



Many other feminists, who probably would not identify as radical, are also hesitant to primarily rely on criminal justice intervention. In fact, scores of feminists who contend that intimate violence is primarily directed at women and who focus on the contribution of broader social forces to this problem assert that harsh law-and-order initiatives “mirror the factors that contribute to abuse” (D. H. Currie & MacLean, 1992; DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997, p. 121). Consider, too, that many police officers are clearly not listening to some feminists’ calls for mandatory arrest and prosecution. Charges are today, as they were 17 years ago, “far from typical” (Kaufman Kantor & Straus, 1990), especially those against men who rape their intimate partners. Regardless of the effectiveness of criminal justice interventions, the response called for today by most feminists involves coordinated, collaborative, community-based initiatives. They do not advance “compartmentalizing social problems along bureaucratic lines” (E. Currie, 1985, p. 18). In other words, they do not contend that because woman abuse is a crime, only the criminal justice system should respond to it.

## Conclusions

Stanko (2006) observes that “what is often missing from a general understanding of violence is asking what can be learned from the struggles feminists have waged for decades now against sexual and physical assault” (p. 554). Certainly, one cannot learn much about contemporary feminist contributions to the field from reading *Rethinking Domestic Violence*. Readers unfamiliar with scholarly and policy work on woman abuse are likely to get the impression that feminists and those informed by other schools of thought basically “fall into ideological positions that categorically dismissed other points of view” (Gondolf, in press). Of course, there are researchers and practitioners who reject the contributions of people who approach topics or social problems in ways distinct from them. Nevertheless, increasingly, we are witnessing large groups of international scholars, advocates, and practitioners embrace diverse ways of thinking about sexual assault, homicide, beatings, sexual harassment, and other “intimate intrusions” (Stanko, 1985). For example, scholars from a broad range of disciplines are teaming up to construct theories and studies that address multiple levels of analysis. There is much less paradigm hostility than that described by Dutton in this period of late modernity. And as the late Paul and Sheila Wellstone (2001) noted in Renzetti, Edleson, and Bergen’s (2001) *Sourcebook on Violence Against Women*, the “shared work of a concerted group of experts promises to affect us all by saving the lives of women” (p. x).

Where do we go from here? Feminist scholar Claire Renzetti (1997) has one of the best answers to this question:

Of course, while the causes of and solutions to the problems are not individualistic, but rather structural, we cannot lose sight of individuals. The challenge we confront is to disentangle the complex relationships between individuals and society, including our

own roles in this dialectic. A tall order, no doubt, but the only one with any chance of real success. (p. vii)

Ending woman abuse and other forms of violence in intimate relationships also requires scholars moving beyond trying to “win a point” in the “name of science” (Renzetti, 1997, p. vi). In addition, we must remember that no matter how we study or try to explain violence against intimate partners, the perspectives we offer are often irrelevant to those who experience it (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997). After all, who knows more about abuse than the people who experience it?

## Notes

1. See Ogradnick (2006) for more information on these surveys.
2. Statistics Canada’s 1993 national Violence Against Women Survey was heavily informed by feminist scholarship. See Johnson (1996) for more information on this study and the data gleaned by it.

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