Domestic Violence: Sociological Perspectives

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Abstract

Domestic violence is characterized by a recent history of rapid social change in institutional policy and practice. The problem is primarily one of men's violence against women and a considerable proportion of women have experienced this type of physical and sexual violence. Physical injuries are often severe and women may suffer from persistent health and emotional problems. When women are murdered, the perpetrator is usually an intimate partner. Women find it difficult to leave a violent relationship because of threats, lack of support, and, historically, the inadequate responses of institutions. Sociological explanations stress the importance of male power and control.

Overview

The issue of 'domestic violence' is an important area of public, political, and academic concern that goes to the heart of the institution of the family and marriage and of gender relations between men and women. It encompasses public and private life as well as social, political, and economic institutions. At the social level, it involves ideological beliefs and institutional policies and practices. At the individual level, it involves personal attitudes and prejudices as well as individual behavior and conventions of daily life. The area is characterized by a history of recent, rapid, social change in institutional policy and practice and is steeped in controversy. There have been political, ideological, and academic controversies about the term itself, the definition of the phenomenon, the nature of the problem, research methods used in its study, findings about the nature and occurrence of the problem, and about the focus and effectiveness of social and legal interventions. Since its rediscovery in Britain and the United States in the early 1970s, virtually every aspect of this issue has been the subject of development and the object of debate not only within the academic community but also across a wide spectrum of society as the media, community activists, academic researchers, and policy makers have taken different positions and entered into sustained and sometimes heated debates. The lively nature of this important social problem warrants further examination of each of the issues touched upon within this characterization, which can only be summarized here.

Most researchers and policy makers agree that the global problem of domestic violence is primarily one of men's violence against women in intimate relationships, and that it has a long and ignoble history. Numerous studies suggest that a considerable proportion of women in a marital or maritallike relationship have experienced domestic violence, that the physical violence is usually associated with other forms of intimidation and control, and that sexual aggression is a significant aspect of many acts of nonlethal and lethal violence against women partners. Men's violence has important consequences for the women they abuse including numerous and repeated physical injuries, sometimes severe and permanent; persistent health problems; and emotional consequences. Women find it very difficult, and sometimes impossible, to leave a violent relationship because of threats of further violence, lack of economic and social support, and insufficient or inadequate responses of statutory and voluntary agencies. When women are murdered, the most likely perpetrator is a male intimate partner or expartner.

Sociological explanations of domestic violence emphasize male privilege, power, and control, and stress the importance of patriarchal beliefs and ideals and the laws, policies, and practices associated with them. Other explanations emphasize individual pathology and/or social traits such as frustration-aggression and the like. Future research will continue to concentrate on efforts to explain domestic violence and the predicament of the women who experience it, as well as issues relating to the impact of social and legal interventions relating to the safety of victims and those concerning the nature and extent of men's violence and the effectiveness of various responses to abusers.

Definition

The terms wife beating, battered wives, wife abuse, woman abuse, spouse abuse, family violence, domestic violence, and intimate partner violence have all been used to describe this phenomenon. The terms and the conceptions they reflect have all been topics of debate and have evolved over time. The initial terminology reflected the notion of husbands and wives in a legally sanctioned marital relationship but quickly evolved to include non-state sanctioned cohabiting relationships between men and women as well as same-sex intimate relationships. The various terms also reflect different conceptions of the gender of the usual perpetrators and victims of the violence: men's violence against women, mutual violence between men and women, or women's violence against men. These and other issues were the subject of considerable debate when the problem was 'rediscovered' in the 1970s and continue to be debated to the present. While the initial terms of 'wife beating' and 'wife abuse' contained a clear imagery of men's violence against a woman partner, they also contained notions of formal marriage as a necessary condition of concern and attention. By contrast, the term 'domestic violence' included the notion that the problem occurred in both state and non-state sanctioned relationships but lost the conception of gender asymmetry regarding who was most likely to be the victim and who the

perpetrate of the violence. For reasons of popular convention rather than resolution of these debates, the term 'domestic violence' became the term in common usage throughout most of the world.

History

Very ancient customs, beliefs, and laws dating back to the early Roman Empire and many of the first conventions of marriage allowed a husband to kill his wife for infidelity and serious challenges to his male authority. These 'rights' were slowly eroded over time through the development of Canon law and the gradual alteration of legal systems in Europe and Britain to punishments allowing chastisement that did not kill or maim. In 1765, Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* noted that conventional cultural beliefs and common legal practices endorsed a man's right to use 'moderate' chastisement against his wife. Blackstone's Commentaries codified this patriarchal right and thus confirmed a husband's authority over his wife for a considerable period of time. Such ideals and legal views crossed the Atlantic with some of the pioneers who brought familiar social attitudes and legal systems to the newly forming nations of North America. While there were some departures from this position, it nonetheless constituted the normative position in many European and North American cultures for a fairly long period of time. Indeed, contemporary evidence from a wide range of societies reveals strong cultural beliefs expressing such ideals, and these are often endorsed by legal practices that illustrate direct or indirect support for 'wife beating' or, at best, weak reactions to its victims and perpetrators.

In European and North American societies, the history of challenges to and changes in social and institutional responses to the problem is punctuated by three historical periods in which domestic violence was discovered anew and obtained widespread recognition as a social problem. Recognition eventually resulted in changes in the laws regulating the institution of marriage and the family as well as developments in the responses of agencies of the state, particularly law and law enforcement, but also in economic, political, and social institutions.

In the 1870s, 1910s, and 1970s, the problem of 'wife beating' was repeatedly discovered by women in Britain and North America who were engaged in more general campaigns for changes in women's marital, economic, political, and/or social status. Within each time period, wider campaigns about changes within the family and marriage (such as, the ability of women to own their own property or to obtain a divorce for excessive cruelty – 1870s), about changes in the political status of women (the right to vote – early 1900s), about changes in the economic status of women (equal pay and equal opportunities within the job market – 1970s), and changes in social relations between men and women in general also spawned an interest in the specific issue of physical violence against women within the home, usually by intimate male partners/husbands within the context of marriage. At each of these junctures, community groups (usually although not always feminist) were formed, there were public protests, public recognition was increased, and the agencies of the state were challenged and responded with public hearings, legislation, and various new policies and practices. After the first two periods of recognition and public response, the issue was soon forgotten and marked by a return to an older, established status quo in which men maintained social, political, and economic authority over women throughout society and particularly within the institution of family and marriage where this right could be exercised legally and morally through the use of violence against women/wives for various real or perceived violations of male authority.

The third period of challenge began in the 1970s, again in Britain and the United States and, rather than being forgotten after a brief period of interest, has instead continued to expand and develop throughout much of the world. Public awareness of the issue and community and state responses to it are now global, resulting in violence against women being defined by the United Nations as an issue of human rights and social justice. At present, many, although certainly not all, societies have experienced challenges to the complacency and social and institutional tolerance that once prevailed and in many countries new laws and institutional practices have been initiated.

The Nature of the Problem, Research Methods, and Findings

Controversies about the nature of the problem itself have been intense and are intertwined in other controversies about research methods and resulting findings. The debates regarding these issues were apparent at the onset of the rediscovery process in the 1970s and have altered little since, although the amount and type of research grew at a tremendous rate in the last quarter of the twentieth century. As stated above, debates about the phenomenon itself center on whether the violence is asymmetrical in nature (men as the most usual perpetrators with women the usual victims) or symmetrical (women and men as equally violent toward one another), and they sometimes even extend to the notion that women are the most likely perpetrators of domestic violence and men the usual victims of women's violence. Debates about research methods have focused on whether one method should supersede all others in producing the 'best' or indeed the only findings of value in answering the question of 'who is violent to whom.' One camp has claimed variously that only surveys based on national probability samples produce valid and reliable findings. Research using this approach has focused on questions of the prevalence of this form of violence in the population and on the relative levels of violence of men and women. Others defend the use of a wide variety of research strategies, which include historical studies showing continuities and changes in patriarchal beliefs and institutional practices over time and ethnographic studies with an intensive focus upon cultural practices as well as the more traditional sociological approaches of victim surveys, criminal statistics, intensive interview studies, studies of strategic sites, and evaluations of new interventions. Proponents of the broad-based sociological and contextual approaches claim that such studies address more pressing and relevant questions about the problem such as 'what is the exact nature of the violence,' 'how are victims and offenders processed by agencies of the state,' and 'what

works at stopping violence.' Such investigations also attempt to examine in detail the contextual dynamics of violent episodes and violent relationships as well as the meaning and consequences of being a victim and/or perpetrator.

Some survey research, particularly in the United States, has relied primarily on a single measurement tool that counts discrete acts (e.g., a shove, a slap, a punch, or a kick) with little or no assessment of issues, such as intentions (e.g., physical harm, intimidation and fear, or retaliation of self defense), the consequences of the acts (e.g., a bruise, a cut, a burn, or a broken bone), or the contexts in which the violence occurs. Counting one shove the same as one punch or one kick appears to support the notion of symmetry in the perpetration of domestic violence, with women deemed to be equally or even more violent than their male partners. With the claim of symmetry in domestic violence comes the notions that theoretical accounts of domestic violence should be gender neutral and that gender is not related to violence within intimate relationships. By contrast, other surveys and more intensive research methods that are not based on this purely act-based measurement find the opposite pattern, that men are the most likely perpetrators and women the most likely victims of domestic violence and thus conclude that domestic violence is asymmetrical and related to gender. Predictably, these contradictory findings have resulted in considerable controversy with claims and counterclaims regarding the validity and reliability of each type of measurement and resulting skepticism regarding the veracity of findings produced by this single measurement tool.

Over time, controversy about the simple question of 'symmetry–asymmetry' – who perpetrates the majority of violent acts (men or women) – has become more complex with the addition of further research questions regarding who is most likely to be responding in self-defense, to be harmed, to live in fear, and to experience other consequences of violence as well as additional research efforts to differentiate between violent acts, threats, intimidation, verbal aggression, arguments, and the like. This evidence reveals strong and consistent patterns across cultures and historical periods showing that the problem of domestic violence is primarily one of men's violence against women that often results in injuries and sometimes ends in the death of the victimized woman and/or her children. Survey research across several countries indicates that anywhere from one-quarter to one-half of women who have lived in intimate relationships with men report at least one incident of violence, and many women report repeated violence. Across countries, anywhere from 10 to 50% of women also report sexual violence from intimate male partners ranging from forced sexual relations to rape. In addition, homicide statistics worldwide suggest that women are more at risk of being killed by a male partner than by anyone else. Every year, in Britain and North America between 40 and 50% of all women who are murdered are killed by an intimate partner or expartner. By contrast, very few men who are murdered are killed by a woman partner. Some of the risk factors associated with lethal and nonlethal domestic violence include economic and educational disadvantage, youth, and cohabiting versus marital relationships. Situational risks include high levels of conflict, jealousy, sexual possessiveness among male partners, and alcohol abuse. Risk of serious nonlethal and lethal violence is also associated with separation and women's attempts to leave violent relationships.

Institutional Policies and Practices

Early investigations of policy and institutional practices in the 1970s revealed considerable failure on the part of legal and social agencies to provide support and protection for women victims and their children as well as a reluctance to deal with male perpetrators. Recent research charts the many changes in policy, practices, and innovations aimed at ending men's violence and providing safety and security to women and children. Initial focus was on the police and the long-established practice of either ignoring domestic violence or treating it as a nuisance, not 'real' violence, and not 'real' police work. In the United States, several high-profile class actions against police departments were brought by feminist advocates on behalf of women who sought but did not receive police intervention after being beaten by their husband or male partner. These and other efforts elsewhere led to early changes within the criminal justice systems of several countries. Numerous initiatives included policies to strengthen arrest, civil protection orders, and exclusion orders as well as the introduction of dedicated domestic violence courts. Innovative sentencing and probation orders in some locations also included participation on the newly created programs for violent abusers such as those pioneered in Duluth, Minnesota, and later introduced in countries throughout the world.

For the most part, abuser programs are based on feminist principles and use a cognitive-behavioral approach incorporating the notion that attitudes and behaviors are learned and culturally based and, as such, can be modified and 'relearned' albeit with considerable effort on the part of the abuser. Some abuser programs are voluntary with men presenting themselves for a variety of personal reasons, often relating to the woman's threats to leave them, while other programs are tied to the justice system as conditions of a sentence after conviction for domestic violence. Here again, there has been considerable controversy as many women's groups running shelters for abused women object to abuser programs on the grounds that they take funding away from efforts to support abused women, that they may treat abusers with too much leniency, and in the belief that they do not work in stopping the violence. The controversy was probably at its most intense throughout the 1990s and vestiges still remain today, although most shelter groups and abuser programs now work cooperatively in the context of a coordinated community response. These include a combination of services for abused women and their children as well as various programs and criminal justice responses aimed at ending the violence of abusers.

Theoretical Accounts

Theoretical explanations of domestic violence predictably include a plethora of competing, at times contradictory, accounts, ranging from the sociocultural to the individualistic. Sociological, usually feminist, explanatory frameworks stress the historical and contemporary existence of male violence

across almost all societies and locate its perpetration within patriarchal ideals and practices, emphasizing male power and control. In these accounts, violence is seen as functional, a resource used in men's attempts to enforce and maintain their domination and control, with conflicts associated with male jealousy, household labor, and economic resources constituting the contexts of violent events. Other sociologically based gender-neutral accounts emphasize power but note that this social attribute is not skewed toward either gender – men and women possess significant amounts of power – and the symmetrical violence that occurs is an expression of such power. Variants of 'gender-neutral' explanations of domestic violence emphasize the importance of individual psychology and/or social traits that are deemed to have similar effects on the violence of men and women alike; these includes stress, frustration, socialization into (sub)cultures of violence, poor anger control, and impoverished social skills. Other-individualistic accounts emphasize the pathological personalities of violent men while still others attempt to understand the predicament and actions of women who live with violent men. Evolutionary psychology has challenged the foundations of these sociocultural and individualistic explanations and, instead, locates men's violence in a universally evolved male psyche involving male sexual proprietariness toward women. Accordingly, this evolved psyche leads men to attempt to possess and control women through various means including violence.

Sociological accounts emphasize widespread social and cultural beliefs as well as institutional policies and practices through which men are privileged in their relationships to women in general and in their relationships with intimate partners in particular. At the interpersonal level, this includes a range of intimidating and controlling acts as well as concerted actions to isolate women from family and friends. Continuous forms of intimidation and isolation make it very difficult, if not impossible, for women to seek help, although it is now clear that most women do engage in active efforts to deal with the violence. Most seek help from family and friends and many also seek assistance from various voluntary organizations such as women's shelters and agencies of the state such as social work and the police. Despite these efforts, women find it difficult to leave the violent relationship. Sociocultural explanations of women's inability to leave a violent relationship stress men's threats of further violence, women's lack of economic and social support, a moral order emphasizing women's obligations to maintain family unity, and inadequate responses of agencies of the state. Other individualistic accounts, particularly in the United States, suggest that personality disorders in women are the primary reason that they are unable to leave violent relationships. According to such accounts, women do not leave violent relationships because they suffer from conditions such as masochism, relationship addiction, 'battered woman'syndrome, and learned helplessness.

By the 1990s and into the 2000s, the enhanced and refined nature of the research questions, along with an increasing concern to evaluate the relative effectiveness of new innovations have further expanded the theoretical questions and the relevant research strategies in this area. Future research in the area will continue to concentrate on efforts to explain domestic violence within the broader social and cultural contexts in which it occurs as well as examine the behavior, motivations and intentions of the men who perpetrate this violence and the predicament of the women who experience it.

The focus on social institutions will continue to address questions about the impact and effectiveness of various social and legal interventions and innovations concerning the welfare and safety of victims and the violence of male abusers. While much of the earliest research was shaped within sociology, women's studies, history and law, the global expansion of interest in this social problem has been mirrored by an equal expansion of disciplines contributing to its study as psychology, criminology, health care, and medicine have variously contributed to advances in knowledge about this significant social problem.

See also: Family Law in the United States; Intimate Partner Abuse, Applied Research On; Rape and Sexual Coercion; Violence and Media; Violence in Anthropology; Violence: Public; War, Political Violence, and Effects on Children.

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INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

SECOND EDITION

EDITED BY

JAMES D. WRIGHT

INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE
SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

SECOND EDITION

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VOLUME 1

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