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The Power to Name: Conceptualizing Domestic Violence as Violence Against Women

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"The power to name is the power to give voice to a social phenomenon or experience – and to have it legitimated" (Naranch, 1997, p.21)

Abstract

Since the early 1970s, feminist researchers and advocates have identified violence against wives or female partners as a serious and pervasive social issue, resulting in changes to housing, social services, and legal reforms. Recently, some family violence researchers, sociologists, and men's activists have challenged feminist claims that women are the primary victims of intimate partner violence; citing numerous studies that suggest men are frequently victims of violence by their female intimate partners and arguing that, because of symmetrical prevalence rates found in numerous studies, violence occurring within intimate relationships represents "mutual combat" and should be conceptualized as gender-neutral. Feminist researchers and women activists oppose gender-neutral conceptualizations and argue that violence is indeed gendered; and issues of context, meaning, and consequences should be examined before making claims of gender symmetry. They contend that the issue should be gender specific and should be viewed as "violence against women", instead of more gender-neutral conceptualizations as "domestic violence" or "spousal abuse". Not surprisingly, a heated debate has erupted among researchers, policymakers, and community activists about the gendered nature of intimate partner violence. Specifically, the debate centers on the rate of women's use of violence against their intimate partners and the degree of harm inflicted by women. This debate about the gendered nature of intimate partner violence will be examined. I conclude by suggesting that a feminist and gender-specific theoretical framework is most useful in understanding heterosexual intimate partner violence.

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Introduction

Over thirty years ago, women's movement activists identified the problem of intimate partner woman abuse or "wife assault" and succeeded in bringing both government and public attention to the issue. Prior to the 1970s violence against wives was viewed primarily as a "private" matter, experienced by a few dysfunctional couples (Renzetti & Bergen, 2005). Since that time it has been regarded as a serious and pervasive social issue, resulting in significant changes to housing, social services, and legal reforms.

Recently, family conflict researchers and men's activists have challenged feminist claims that women are the primary victims of intimate partner violence, citing numerous studies that suggest men are frequently victims of violence by their female intimate partners (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Sommer, 1998; Stets & Straus, 1990; Straus, Gelles, Steinmetz, 1980; Straus, 2005). To date, over 160 studies on relationship violence suggest that women's rate of perpetrating violence against their male partners is equal (or in some studies, slightly higher) than men's rates of perpetration (cf. Archer, 2000; Kimmel, 2002). Family conflict researchers assert that because of the symmetrical prevalence rates found in numerous studies, violence occurring within intimate relationships largely represents "mutual combat" and should, therefore, be considered gender-neutral. Further, the assumption that women and men perpetrate violence of equal magnitude warrants that societal resources should be provided equally to both abused women and abused men.

On the other hand, women's activists, feminist theorists and researchers studying violence against women oppose a gender-neutral conceptualization of the problem, arguing that violence or battering that occurs within intimate relationships is indeed gendered (Bograd, 1990; Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1998; Saunders, 1990; Yllö, 1990) and issues of context, meaning, and consequences should be examined before making claims of gender symmetry (Currie, 1998; Dasgupta, 1999; Dobash et al., 1998; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Johnson, 1995; Kimmel, 2002; Kurz, 1998; Saunders, 1986; Saunders, 1990; Saunders, 2002; Tutty, 1999). They contend that the issue is gender specific and should be viewed as "violence against women", instead of more gender-neutral conceptualizations as "domestic violence" or "spousal abuse". Not surprisingly, a heated debate has erupted among researchers, policymakers, and community activists about the gendered nature of intimate partner violence. Specifically, the debate centers on the rate of women's use of violence against their intimate partners and the degree of harm inflicted by women (Tutty, 1999).

In this paper, the debate about the gendered nature of domestic violence will be examined through a review and analysis of the literature pertaining to violence that occurs within intimate partner relationships. Within this body of literature, there are two major theoretical approaches – the degendered approach espoused mostly by family sociologists and psychologists whom assert that violence between intimate partners is mutual and symmetrical; and the gendered approach, espoused by feminist theorists and violence-against-women researchers whom argue that violence is perpetrated primarily against women by their male intimate partners. These two major theoretical approaches used to understand violence within intimate partner relationships will be examined and compared. The paper concludes that a feminist and gender-specific theoretical framework is most useful in understanding heterosexual intimate partner violence, and therefore should be conceptualized as "violence against women", as opposed to gender-neutral terms such as domestic violence or spousal abuse. I begin by examining the importance of naming and the language used in constructing social problems.

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The Power of Naming

The introductory quote speaks to the power of naming. The ability to name means being able to define how we view the problem, and ultimately how we should address the problem. The way a problem is framed will also have a profound impact on how the individual experiences the problem. Naranch (1997) suggests that "by giving voice to a problem, women gain the power to make a concern publicly visible as a social and political problem, not just as a personal or individual problem" (p.24).

Language is important in how a problem becomes framed. The language used in defining a problem is critical for those most affected by it as it determines how they will make sense of the problem, and thereby feel empowered to take action against the violence (Naranch, 1997). Additionally, the language used does more than simply describe an action, it sets the agenda for a course of action (Naranch, 1997). For example, how the problem is constructed will largely determine how state institutions address the problem, for instance, through the creation of policies and programs.

More than three decades ago, feminist theorists and women's activists were the first to identify and name violence against women, namely in the discourse of rape and wife assault (Levan, 1996; Naranch, 1997). Naming the problem of violence against women has helped women raise awareness of the issues affecting women, resulting in significant changes to social services (e.g., the creation of emergency shelters, sexual assault crisis centres, and women's centres), and justice and law enforcement (e.g., changes in rape laws and mandatory charging policies). However, in the last decade or so, there has been an interest to shift how society views the issue of violence occurring within intimate partner relationships. Some researchers contend that the social problem of violence against women should no longer be viewed as a gendered problem, only affecting women; and instead should be reconceptualized to also include situations where women are perpetrators and men are victims (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Gelles, 1999; Sommer, 1998; Straus et al., 1980; Straus, 2005).

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The Family Conflict or Family Violence Perspective: The Degendered Approach

The family conflict perspective or family violence is predicated on the assumptions that violence occurring within intimate relationships is largely gender-neutral, with both partners committing equal acts of violence; can be explained by individualist factors as opposed to societal or structural factors; and best represents “conflict” between two marital or intimate partners. The major contributors to this perspective come from the traditions of psychology (e.g., Dr. John Archer, Dr. Donald Dutton, and Dr. Reena Sommer) and family sociology (e.g., Dr. Eugen Lupri, Dr. Richard Gelles, Dr. Susan Steinmetz, and Dr. Murray Straus).

Efforts to measure or quantify the prevalence of family violence began in the United States in the mid 1970s. Family sociologists, Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, conducted the first national study on the prevalence of intimate partner violence in the United States using the newly developed Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) to measure the prevalence of violent or “conflict tactics” used within intimate and marital relationships. Their study found that men and women reported using violence within their intimate relationships at almost equal rates (Straus et al., 1980). In the 1985 follow-up study, they found that not only women’s rates of physical violence were equal to men’s, but women admitted to initiating violence against their male partners at slightly higher rates (although not significantly) than did the male respondents (Stets & Straus, 1990). Since then a flood of family conflict studies have been conducted that have resulted in similar findings – that men and women commit almost equal rates of violence within intimate or marital relationships, with women initiating slightly higher rates of violence than men (see Archer, 2000; Straus & Gelles, 1986). More recently, the 2004 General Social Survey estimates that approximately 7% of Canadian women and 6% of Canadian men experienced some form of spousal violence by a current or previous partner in a five-year period (1999-2004) (Statistics Canada, 2005). Family conflict researchers and men’s rights activists have used these findings to base their claims that the violence that occurs within intimate relationships is largely gender-neutral and symmetrical, suggesting that women are equally as physically and psychologically abusive as men (Archer, 2000; Gelles, 1999; Men’s Educational Support Association, 1998; Straus, 1993; Straus, 2005).

Some family conflict researchers claim that feminist theories of violence are “single-cause” theories, ignoring other important factors that may contribute to violence within intimate relationships, such as individual or interpersonal factors, psychological disturbances, and substance abuse (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005). Mostly, family conflict researchers criticize feminist theories of battering because of their failure to recognize women’s violence. They contend that the numerous studies reporting higher levels of violence by female perpetrators than those reported by males cannot be adequately explained by feminist theories (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005). Family conflict researchers also challenge feminist claims that violence against male partners is often defensive and reactive, citing studies that women are frequently the initiators of violence, resulting in serious injuries to men (Archer, 2000; Stets & Straus, 1990). Further, feminist theories of violence against women are criticized for failing to explain individual differences in male aggression – that some men do not use violence against their female partners. Family conflict researchers question how individual men can be held accountable if patriarchy is to blame (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005).

Rather than considering broader social structural factors, including patriarchy and oppression, the family conflict approach assumes that the problem of intimate partner violence stems primarily from individual or interpersonal factors, such as psychological disturbances (e.g., low self-esteem, poor attachment, etc.), alcohol abuse and/or maladaptive couple relationships (Bland & Orn, 1986; Dutton, 2002; Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Fiebert & Gonzalez, 1997; Sommer, 1998). Some assert that intimacy and psychopathology offer more plausible explanations of violence than gender and patriarchy (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Sommer, 1998). For instance, Dutton and Nicholls argue that the close and intimate nature of intimate relationships can bring out feelings of intense emotion and coupled with psychological factors such as anger and anxiety can result in violence between couples. Because of the presence of deviant individual or family traits that are common to both men and women, both parties in intimate relationships are potentially equally capable of committing violent acts against their partner.

Some family conflict researchers comment on gender as being an important component in understanding violence, however, they view gender as one of many factors that may contribute to violence within intimate relationships (Straus, 2005). The focus tends to be primarily on individual psychological and social traits of individuals, regardless of gender (Dobash et al., 1998). Likewise, some researchers acknowledge the importance of societal or cultural factors, however, these are usually in relation to individual or family problems. For example, Sommer (1998) suggests that violence is a problem “stemming from maladaptive family relations embedded within wider maladaptive social conditions” (p.37).

Not surprisingly, the family conflict approach considers shorter-term solutions focused at the individual level, including therapeutic programs aimed at helping victims and perpetrators of violence as being the most appropriate and effective. Whereas longer-term solutions at the macro or societal level are considered less helpful (Wardell, Gillespie & Leffler, 1983). Further, because family conflict researchers locate the problem in the family, they argue that other forms of family violence should also be examined, such as child abuse, sibling abuse, and elder abuse. For example, Straus (1990b) argues that abuse victims learn that violence is acceptable and normal and later become either perpetrators or victims.

Family conflict researchers argue that legal and social policies, although well intended, are based on

erroneous information about the causes and consequences of intimate partner violence. They assert that such policies are predicated on the belief that a large number of women suffer severe and chronic forms of battering, and do little to serve the needs of the much larger majority of men, women, and children who experience the frequent problem of “common couple violence” (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005). Not surprisingly, proponents of the gender symmetry approach have been vocal advocates for equal policies and services for women and men (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005).

Family conflict researchers and men’s rights activists have vehemently argued that policy oriented efforts for women are misplaced because they focus entirely on women as the primary victims of intimate partner violence (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Gelles, 1999). They argue that women and men should be regarded as potential victims, and should have equal access to victim-related services. Further, some have attempted to point out that women’s alleged victimization has caused a widespread bias against men (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Fekete, 1995; Straus, 2005). Dutton and Nicholls (2005) suggest that the results of feminist theories of intimate violence have been to “misdirect social and legal policy, to misinform custody assessors, police, and judges, to disregard data sets contradictory to the prevailing theory, and to mislead attempts at therapeutic change for perpetrators” (p.682).

It is important to note that the family conflict approach to violence within intimate relationships has been based on findings primarily from community surveys involving the responses of both men and women (Archer, 2000; Straus & Gelles, 1996; Straus et al., 1980), as opposed to crime surveys or victimization surveys that include the perspectives of victims and perpetrators of intimate partner violence. Family conflict researchers purport that community surveys using family conflict scales, such as the CTS (or modifications of the CTS) are more sensitive compared to crime surveys or victimization surveys (which tend to reveal that violence is gendered, with women being the primary victims), and therefore, are able to detect violence and aggression that occurs within intimate relationships more accurately (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Straus, 2005). They argue that crime surveys and women’s victimization surveys are limited because of how the research is carried out. For example, only those violent acts labelled as “crimes” are included, and the lack of accounts from men in women’s victimization surveys. They believe that these findings are not a true or accurate reflection of the violence that occurs within marital or intimate relationships (Straus, 2005). In fact, some researchers argue that men’s victimization is seriously underreported because men are not likely to view assaults by women as “crimes” and men are too ashamed or embarrassed to disclose being victims of female perpetrators (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005). Further, they argue that crime and victimization surveys and research based on clinical samples are not representative of the wider population, casting doubt on feminist claims that violence within intimate relationships is gendered (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Straus, 1990a; Straus, 2005).

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The Violence Against Women Perspective: The Gendered Approach

The fundamental contribution of feminist analyses of violence is that violence is gendered – that there is a clear gender division between those who perpetrate violence and those who suffer it (Price, 2005). Violence-against-women researchers and feminist theorists have not denied that women are capable of committing violent acts or that men and boys can be victims. In fact, some suggest that violence by women is a serious concern that warrants attention (Loseke & Kurz, 2005; Tutty, 1999). Instead, feminist scholars argue that when we consider national and global statistics of violent acts, including intimate partner violence, spousal homicide, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, stalking, sexual harassment, prostitution, and pornography, the undeniable fact is that overwhelmingly the perpetrators are male, and the victims are women and girls (Price, 2005).

In terms of intimate partner violence specifically, feminist researchers (unlike family conflict researchers) argue that gender is the most salient factor when explaining intimate partner violence. Feminist [1] theoretical frameworks assume that the violence occurring in intimate partner relationships must be located within the gendered context of men’s and women’s lives. Because men as a group have more power in society than women, violent behaviours by women against men in intimate relationships must be seen differently from men’s violence against women (Tutty, 1999). Consequently, the violence-against-women approach suggests that the problem should not be conceptualized in gender-neutral terms, such as “domestic violence” or “spousal abuse”, but rather in gender-specific terms such as “wife abuse” or “violence against women”. Feminists and women’s advocates are critical of the family conflict approach that conceptualizes violence in degendered terms, arguing that such definitions obscure the reality of violence that occurs within intimate relationships. The violence-against-women approach also assumes that issues of gender and power are fundamental to understanding violence against women (Bograd, 1990; Worcester, 2002). Further, this approach connects intimate partner violence to other forms of violence that women experience. Proponents of this approach argue that framing the issue as “family” or “spousal” violence ignores the abuse of women outside the nuclear family, including sexual harassment, sexual assault, prostitution and pornography, and sex trafficking (Naranch, 1997). Consequently, gender-neutral terminology and locating the problem within the family can lead to problems in how the causes and solutions of violence

against women are conceptualized and operationalized (Bograd, 1990). Some have argued that degendered conceptualizations will jeopardize the successes that feminists have achieved, and lead to the reduction of crisis services for women and the regression of important policies for women (Bograd, 1990; Loseke & Kurz, 2005; Naranch, 1997).

The gendered approach to violence assumes that structural or systemic forces contribute to the violence that many women experience. Violence-against-women researchers have pointed out the continued existence (throughout history and culture) and pervasiveness of violence against women, arguing that it cannot be adequately explained by individual psychopathology or family dysfunction as suggested by the family conflict approach (Bograd, 1990; DeKeseredy & Hinch, 1991; Koss et al., 1994). The high incidence and prevalence of violence against women reported in Canada and in other countries suggest that non-sociological approaches to violence against women are more useful (DeKeseredy & Hinch, 1991). Individualist approaches ignore the question of power and do not explain why allegedly mentally ill men who beat their wives or girlfriends but do not beat their bosses, for example (Bograd, 1990). Consequently, violence against women must be viewed as a "public issue" rather than a "personal trouble".

Researchers who adopt a gendered approach to violence argue that any discussion of intimate partner violence must examine issues of context, meaning, results, and consequences and, therefore, question the findings derived from family conflict studies. Simply counting the number of violent acts (i.e., hit for hit) by men and women fails to include important variables, such as the situational context involving the motives of each partner, the rates of initiation of violence by each partner, the results achieved by using violence, and the physical and psychological consequences of the violence to each partner (Dasgupta, 1999; Dobash et al., 1998; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Kimmel, 2002; Loseke & Kurz, 2005; Saunders, 1986; Saunders, 1990; Saunders, 2002; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

The violence-against-women approach also assumes that the gendered context of men and women's lives is central in the analysis of violence occurring within intimate relationships. Feminist theorists argue that although women may commit acts of violence, the gendered context in which their violence occurs is highly important. According to Loseke and Kurz (2005), "men's violence toward women and women's violence toward men are not the same, because these acts occur within the historical, cultural, political, economic, and psychological contexts of gender" (p.84). In other words, men and women's social locations in society are significantly different and will shape how men and women experience violence. Social institutions such as marriage and the family are especially relevant as they may support men's use of physical force against women (Bograd, 1990). Scholars have pointed out women's unequal status in the family which is demonstrated by women's lower economic status within the family and women's larger burden of care-giving responsibilities (Loseke & Kurz, 2005). Others have also emphasized the importance of the family as contributing to violence against women, as it has provided the space for men to assert their privileged position and power over their female spouses. Once married, women are viewed as being rightly subject to the control and command of their husbands (Dobash & Dobash, 1990). According to feminist scholars, family violence researchers have incorrectly assumed that both spouses or partners have an equal degree of power and negotiating ability in the family; and this oversight has contributed to misinterpreting the violence that occurs within intimate relationships (Currie, 1998).

As mentioned earlier, numerous community studies have cited approximately equal rates of violence by men and women in intimate relationships. It is beyond the scope of this paper to note the limitations of each study, however, significant limitations common to these studies have been noted, suggesting that the findings be interpreted cautiously. Violence-against-women researchers have questioned the findings of studies that cite equal rates of violence between men and women because they do not ask about the motives and consequences of violence (Saunders, 1986). Further, researchers assert that many of the studies are based on limited research methods, namely quantitative measures such as the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Currie, 1998; DeKeseredy & MacLean, 1998; Dobash et al., 1998; Kimmel, 2002; Saunders, 1990; Saunders, 2002). Although the CTS is likely the most commonly used instrument to assess the rate of violence with intimate relationships, researchers have highlighted the various limitations of the CTS, including: the CTS only asks about conflict tactics used in arguments or disputes, ignoring violence that is the result of "blows out of the blue" and efforts to control the victim (Kimmel, 2002; Saunders, 2002); the CTS only includes cohabitating couples, thereby ignoring the high rate of violence that is perpetrated by former partners (Saunders, 2002); the measure does not include forms of sexual violence and stalking (CTS2 asks about various forms of sexual victimization) (Saunders, 2002); the instrument fails to look at violence and patterns of violence that are on-going over many years (Kimmel, 2002); it ignores motivational factors for using violent tactics (e.g., self-defence or retaliating against years of abuse) (Kimmel, 2002; Saunders, 2002); and it conflates significant forms of violence with potentially trivial gestures, denying the possibility that some "minor" acts (such as pushing, slapping) can result in serious injuries (e.g., the loss of teeth or being thrown down a flight of stairs) (Dobash et al., 1998).

Others have challenged the reliability of community surveys and argue that for various reasons, including fear and lack of trust, many women, particularly those who are severely abused will not participate in general surveys (Loseke & Kurz, 2005). Additionally, researchers have questioned the accounts of male

perpetrators, as they appear to have significantly different accounts of violence than their female partners (Dobash et al., 1998; Kimmel, 2002). Researchers have pointed out that men generally tend to underreport their use of violence and over-report their victimization (Dobash et al., 1998). Research has also demonstrated that women, in fact, do the opposite – that they over-report their use of violence and underreport their victimization (Tutty, 1999). Given these criticisms of the CTS, researchers argue that the findings of family conflict studies are seriously problematic – that they overestimate the violence done by women and underestimate the violence done by men (Kimmel, 2002; Loseke & Kurz, 2005). In fact, some argue that when studies attempt to address the aforementioned problems, the rate of men's violence against women is much higher than the rate of women's use of violence (Loseke & Kurz, 2005; Saunders, 2002).

Understanding the contextual factors of violence and intimate relationships is fundamental to the gendered approach. Violence-against-women researchers contend that the family conflict approach largely ignores the contextual factors that significantly impact people's experiences with abuse, including the motivation, consequences, and meaning of the violence (Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger & Guse, 2002). Some violence-against-women researchers and front-line practitioners have argued that in most cases, women's use of force or violence cannot be considered battering, as many family conflict researchers have indicated (Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger, 1997; Miller & Meloy, 2006; Osthoff, 2002; Saunders, 1990). Feminist researchers have examined men's and women's use of violence and argue that battering behaviour is more illustrative of male abusive behaviour where the primary motivation is to inflict pain and injury, as means to control or dominate their female partner (Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger & Guse, 2002). Men's use of violence is not a discrete set of isolated violent events, but constitutes an ongoing pattern of domination, control, and fear (Dasgupta, 1999; DeKeseredy & MacLean, 1998; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Saunders, 1990). Whereas, women's use of violence is primarily for self-defence or to retaliate for previous violence perpetrated against them (Hamberger, 1997; Miller & Meloy, 2006; Osthoff, 2002; Saunders, 1990). When women use violence it is rarely to inflict pain or injury and not to control or dominate their spouse (DeKeseredy & MacLean, 1998; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Miller & Meloy, 2006; Saunders, 1986). Women who aggress against their partner are usually the primary victims engaging in active resistance and not abusers who wish to exert fear and control (Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Miller & Meloy, 2006). More importantly, many women may use violence and even initiate it at times, but they do not control the overall dynamics of the abusive relationship in ways that men do.

Researchers studying violence from a gendered perspective have suggested that not only do women and men experience different rates of violence, they also experience the effects of violence differently (Archer, 2000; Besserer & Trainor, 2000; Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2005; Stets & Straus, 1990; Saunders, 1990; Saunders, 2002). For example, women are significantly more likely to sustain severe physical and psychological injuries and/or require medical attention than men (Archer, 2000; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2005; Stets & Straus, 1990). Researchers note that women experience more severe and repeated forms of violence than men (Archer, 2000; Dobash et al., 1998; Hotton, 2001; Kimmel, 2002; Saunders, 1990; Saunders, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2005; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). For example, a national study on family violence in Canada, revealed that twice as many women as men are beaten, five times as many women are choked, and almost twice as many women have had a gun or knife used against them (Statistics Canada, 1999). According to researchers, women are more likely to be victims of stalking than are men (Statistics Canada, 2005; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Approximately 11% of Canadian women over the age of 15 years report being victims of stalking, compared to 7% of Canadian men (Statistics Canada, 2005). Additionally, the number of female homicide victims in Canada from 1974-2000 outnumbered male victims more than 3 to 1; and in 2001, 4 of 5 victims of intimate partner homicide in Canada were female (Dauvergne, 2002).

Not surprisingly, researchers have acknowledged that intimate partner violence can have profound health consequences for women. A recent study assessing the health impact of intimate partner violence on women in Australia noted that for women under the age of 45 years, intimate partner violence has a greater impact on health than any other risk factors, including obesity, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and illicit drug use (see Cherniak, Grant, Mason, Moore, & Pellizzari, 2005). Other health researchers have indicated that women experiencing intimate partner violence are at an increased risk for mental health problems, substance abuse, chronic physical disorders, and sexual health complaints (Cherniak et al., 2005). For some women, pregnancy poses a time of risk for injury caused by intimate partner violence (Cherniak et al., 2005; Janssen, et al., 2003). Studies conclude that 1.5% to 17% of all pregnant women experience violence by intimates (see Cherniak et al., 2005). Other researchers have found that homicide is a leading cause of death of pregnant and postpartum women, and speculate that a significant portion of these homicides are the result of intimate partner violence (Chang, Berg, Saltzman, & Herndon, 2005).

Women also report that the violence has a greater emotional impact on them than men (Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2005; Tutty, 1999; Yodanis, 2004). Women are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety than men (Statistics Canada, 2005). For example, in the 2004 General Social Survey, only 6% of female spousal violence victims reported that the abuse did not affect them much overall.

Whereas, 30% of men reported that their experiences with spousal violence did not affect them much (Statistics Canada, 2005).

When men use violence against their female partners, they are usually successful in instilling fear and ultimately controlling or changing their partners' behaviour (Besserer & Trainor, 2000; Hamberger & Guse, 2002). On the contrary, men who have been struck by their female partners are not usually fearful of their spouse (Hamberger & Guse, 2002). This is markedly different compared to the life-long fear that women escaping violence often experience (Yodanis, 2004). National studies have concluded that women are more likely to fear for their life as a result of intimate partner violence than men (Statistics Canada, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2000). In the 2004 General Social Survey 30% of female victims of intimate partner violence stated that they were more fearful because of the violence they experienced, while only 5% of male victims did (Statistics Canada, 2005). Further, women's use of force is usually unsuccessful in that it does not change their male partners' behaviour in the ways that the women intended (Dasgupta, 1999; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Miller & Meloy, 2006; Saunders, 1990). Violence-against-women researchers assert that the gender differences in the results and consequences of violence compel us to examine the issue of violence from a gendered perspective (Loseke & Kurz, 2005).

Feminist theorists and violence-against-women researchers have expressed concern about the potential political implications of describing women's and men's violence as equivalent and symmetrical (Loseke & Kurz, 2005; Saunders, 1986; Saunders, 2002). They argue that the misconception that violence within intimate relationships is gender-neutral will negatively impact services for abused women [2]. Research demonstrating violence as symmetrical will deny the seriousness of violence against women and will lead to the reduction (and perhaps, elimination) of essential services for abused women. Women will not be viewed as innocent or legitimate victims and, therefore, undeserving of public sympathy. Instead, abused women will be viewed as partly responsible for the violence that they experience (Loseke & Kurz, 2005; Saunders, 1986; Saunders, 2002). Without a full understanding of women's use of violence, serious negative consequences can occur, such as the laying of dual charges, increase in arrests and criminal records, women losing custody of their children, restriction from some jobs, women losing immigration status and/or being deported. Perhaps most importantly, women may be reluctant to contact the police in future violent situations, leaving themselves and their children more at risk (Loseke & Kurz, 2005).

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Conceptualizing Domestic Violence as “Violence Against Women”

The dominant conceptualization of violence against women in intimate relationships as a problem of “family violence” is widespread (Kurz, 1998). In this section, I argue that a gender-specific theoretical orientation provides a more useful framework for understanding violence that occurs within heterosexual intimate partner relationships. “Violence against women” is a more useful conceptualization because it acknowledges the gendered nature of violence and locates the problem in a socio-political space that acknowledges the widespread and systemic violence that all women, regardless of age, race, and social status, experience.

A gendered approach is warranted for several reasons, including: the high rates of violence experienced by women nationally and worldwide; the contextual factors that make women's experiences with violence unique; the profound consequences of violence on women's physical, social, and psychological well-being; and the costs to society. A gendered approach also draws linkages to other forms of oppression and violence experienced by women (hooks, 1984).

Men's use of violence against women is one of the world's most widespread public health and human rights concerns (United Nations Population Fund, 2000). The United Nations estimates that between 20% and 50% of women worldwide have experienced some form of physical violence from intimate partners or family members (United Nations Population Fund, 2000). The United Nations announced that gender-based violence is perhaps the most widespread and socially tolerated of human rights violations and the cost to women, their children, families and communities is a significant obstacle to reducing poverty and achieving gender equality.

In Canada, violence or the threat of violence is a disturbing reality for women. According to the Violence Against Women Survey conducted in 1993, more than half of all Canadian women reported being victims of physical and/or sexual assault since the age of sixteen (Statistics Canada, 1993). In particular, intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence experienced by women in Canada (Cherniak et al., 2005; Statistics Canada, 2005). This is in stark contrast to men, who are more likely to be attacked by a stranger or acquaintance than they are by a female intimate partner (Cherniak et al., 2005).

As noted earlier, several studies suggest that women and men report almost equal rates of spousal or intimate partner violence. However, these studies have been based on the outcomes derived from the Conflict Tactics Scale, which measures conflict (not necessarily battering) in families and does not capture the important contextual factors that must be considered when we are discussing intimate partner violence. As mentioned previously, many studies reveal that women use violence out of self-defense or as a response

to their ongoing victimization (DeKeseredy & MacLean, 1998; Hamberger, 1997; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Saunders, 1986). Others note that women, unlike men, typically do not use violence to dominate and control their partner. Instead, women use violent tactics to express their feelings of frustration within the relationship or use violence to solve conflict (Dasgupta, 1999; DeKeseredy & MacLean, 1998; Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Saunders, 1990). Indeed, women may commit acts of violence but these acts should not automatically be called "abuse". Abuse includes the broader concepts of power and control, occurs repeatedly over time, and increases in severity over time (Tutty, 1999). These defining elements are notably missing in women's perpetration (Tutty, 1999). Therefore, information about the context of violence and the motives for women's violence is more informative than simply counting the number of hits (Tutty, 1999).

As mentioned earlier, women are at greater risk of physical and psychological injury than men. More often, women suffer serious physical injury, including death, compared to men, and women are more likely to suffer serious, long-term emotional effects, including depression and anxiety. Not only are the physical and psychological costs extremely high for victimized women but so too are social and legal costs to society. The costs accrued for the supply and maintenance of medical services, counselling and shelter services, and criminal justice services are enormous (Day, 1995; Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women, 2002; Greaves, Hankivsky, & Kingston-Riechters, 1995). Greaves, Hankivsky and Kingston-Riechters (1995) estimate that the physical and sexual abuse of girls and women costs the Canadian economy approximately \$4.2 billion dollars each year, factoring into account social services, criminal justice, lost employment days, and health care interventions. Therefore, the costs of violence perpetrated against women and girls compel us to examine this from a gendered perspective.

A violence-against-women approach also allows us to examine intimate partner violence within the context of women's experiences with violence more broadly. This is notably missing in the degendered, family conflict approach to violence. Wife assault or intimate partner violence is, unfortunately, only one of many forms of violence that women experience, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, prostitution and pornography. For the majority of Canadian women, intimate partner violence is indeed a particularly salient security concern. However, many minority women, who are marginalized by race, class, sexual orientation or ability, are much more vulnerable to violence. In fact, marginalized women experience greater levels of violence and experienced other forms of violence, such as public and structural violence. For instance, women involved in prostitution experience extreme violence and the threat of violence on almost a daily basis (Nixon, Tutty, Downe, Gorkoff, & Ursel, 2002). Likewise, Aboriginal women experience significantly higher rates of intimate partner violence and femicide than non-Aboriginal women (Gartner, Dawson, & Crawford, 1998). Research has also suggested that lesbian women are frequently vulnerable to violence in their personal lives (Ristock, 2002) and also vulnerable to violence in their public lives (Caucus Lesbien, 1993). In one study, 36 percent of lesbians experienced verbal, psychological or physical violence in the public sphere (Caucus Lesbien, 1993). Because of previous experience with victimization by state institutions (or the perception that they will be victimized by state institutions), many marginalized and oppressed women are reluctant to report violence to the police or other helping professionals, including social workers, nurses and physicians (Nixon et al., 2002; Ristock, 2002). By ignoring the impact of gender and primarily focusing on violence that occurs within the nuclear family or domestic sphere, and conceptualizing it as "family" or "domestic violence", we fail to address the public and structural issues of violence that marginalized groups of women experience outside of the family. A violence-against-women approach ensures that these forms of violence are also recognized, whereas degendered approaches that locate violence in the family tend to ignore these others forms of violence.

Further, the high rate of violence against men, claimed by many family conflict researchers, is not consistent with the day-to-day reality of front-line workers, such as shelter workers, police, doctors, and nurses. Front-line workers report seeing few victimized men who have been harmed to the same extent as victimized women (Tutty, 1999). Some family conflict researchers contend that because of cultural expectations and stereotypes, men are reluctant to report abuse or seek medical attention for the injuries that they sustain (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Straus, 2005). Although this may be a plausible assumption, there is, in fact, little empirical evidence to suggest that men are more reluctant to report violence or seek assistance than women (Tutty, 1999). Whereas, there is a large body of research evidence that reveals abused women's reluctance to disclose or report their experience with violence to helping professionals (Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 2000; Herman, 1992; Ristock, 2002; Thomlinson, Erickson, & Cook, 2002; Walker, 1979). The lack of men's use of victim, medical or criminal justice services prompts us to question the need to reconsider violence occurring within intimate partner relationships as a gender-neutral problem.

As mentioned earlier, a degendered approach to intimate partner violence can have a profound impact on the policies and services provided to women. Degendering violence ignores the important reality that most victims of severe intimate partner violence are women, which could have serious implications for government initiatives intended to solve the problem, such as the reduction of shelter and emergency services of women and an erosion of policies designed to protect and support abused women. Renzetti notes that the criminal justice system has adopted a gender-neutral application of the law, which has resulted in women being treated unjustly because they have been treated like men even though their circumstances typically are quite different. A gender-neutral approach that locates the problem in the family

and ignores the sociohistorical aspects of violence will also have serious implications for the formulation of solutions. For example, degendered theoretical constructions of “domestic violence” or “spousal violence” may lead practitioners to focus their attention at the individual level and family, promoting the use of individual and family therapeutic interventions. Degendered approaches ignore the structural factors that contribute to the violence that women experience within intimate relationships, namely patriarchy, misogyny, and women’s social and economic inequity (Levan, 1996). Further, viewing women’s violence as equivalent to men’s violence has serious implications for programming and policymaking since abused women may no longer be considered legitimate victims, worthy of unique protective and supportive services.

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Conclusion

There is a controversial debate on the gendered nature of intimate partner violence. Family conflict researchers and men’s rights advocates argue that men and women commit equal or symmetrical acts of violence against one another in intimate relationships and, therefore, a gender-neutral conceptualization of domestic violence is most useful. On the contrary, feminist theorists and violence-against-women researchers argue that this body of research is misleading and fails to understand the context and meaning of violence within intimate relationships. They also argue that the family conflict approach adopted by many researchers ignores the socio-historical context in which violence against women occurs. Therefore, violence should be considered a gendered phenomenon and degendered terms such as “domestic violence”, “spousal violence” and “family violence” are misleading and inaccurate. Including gender, power and context into theoretical and practical understandings of violence is essential. Because of the gendered nature of violence, intervention and prevention efforts must continue to focus on violence against women. Failure to include a gender analysis and important contextual factors will impede our ability to draw conclusions and develop more effective policies and programs for both victims and perpetrators of violence. Simply counting “hits” without considering the context of social inequalities and gender roles will not result in a fuller understanding of the violence that occurs within intimate relationships. Gender symmetry discourse will obstruct women’s claims for equal protection and assistance and women’s right to physical autonomy. Further, it is crucial to have an understanding of abused women’s use of violence because of the implications that exist for the social response to the problem of intimate partner violence.

However, this does not mean that society should ignore women’s use of violence. It is clear from the research that both men and women engage in violent and aggressive acts. Indeed there are men who are victims of violence from their female partners, and they should be treated with the same respect, compassion and understanding that women victims of abuse are treated.

Further, adopting a violence-against-women approach as opposed to a “family conflict” approach in situations of intimate partner violence or battering enables us to examine the bigger picture of the violence that is so often perpetrated against women. A family conflict approach tends to focus on the individual – why a particular man beats his wife or why a particular woman remains in an abusive relationship. A violence-against-women approach, on the other hand, seeks to understand why men in general use violence or force against their partners and the impact that this has on social relations. Therefore, a gendered approach is useful in formulating policies and programs for victims of violence – both women and men.

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Endnotes

[1] There are a variety of feminist philosophies and theoretical frameworks that attempt to explain violence against women. However, all feminist perspectives believe that when exploring issues of violence against women, gender and power is important, as well as situating violence within a sociohistorical framework.

[2] In the early 1980s, funding for battered women’s services in the United States was threatened as policymakers called for funding to develop “battered men’s” shelters and services (Hamberger, 1997)

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