

A Gender Theory of Domestic Violence (Intimate Terrorism)

Let me begin with a reminder that the discussion above indicates that in heterosexual relationships the strongest correlate of type of intimate partner violence is gender. In heterosexual relationships intimate terrorism is perpetrated almost entirely by men and, of course, the violent resistance to it is from their female partners. The gendering of situational couple violence is less clear and will be addressed in the next section.

To a sociologist, the tremendous gender imbalance in the perpetration of intimate terrorism suggests important social structural causes that go beyond simple differences between men and women. For over two decades now, feminist sociologists have argued that gender must be understood as an institution, not merely an individual characteristic. Although some gender theorists have couched this argument in terms of rejecting gender as an individual characteristic in favor of focusing at the situational or institutional level of analysis (e.g., Ferree 1990), I prefer a version of gender theory that incorporates gender at all levels of social organization, from the individual level of sex differences in identities and attitudes, and even physical differences, through the situational enforcement of gender in social interaction to the gender structure of organizational and societal contexts (Ferree, Lorber, and Hess 2000; Risman 2004). The application of gender theory to intimate terrorism that follows will start with individual sex differences and work up to the gender structure of the economy, the family, and the criminal justice system.

Why is intimate terrorism (and violent resistance to it) so clearly a matter of men abusing women in heterosexual relationships? First, gender affects the use of violence to control one's partner in heterosexual relationships simply because of average sex differences in size and strength. The use of violence as one tactic in an attempt to exercise general control over one's partner requires more than the willingness to do violence. It requires a credible threat of a damaging violent response to noncompliance. Such a threat is, of course, more credible coming from a man than a woman simply because of the size difference in most heterosexual couples. Furthermore, still at the level of individual differences but focusing on gender socialization rather than physical differences, individual attitudes toward violence and experience with violence make such threats more likely and more credible from a man than from a woman. Put simply, the exercise of violence is more likely to be a part of boys' and men's experience than girls' and women's—in sports, fantasy play, and real-life conflict.

Second, individual misogyny and gender traditionalism are clearly implicated in intimate terrorism. Although critics of feminist theory often claim that there is no relationship between attitudes towards women and domestic violence (Felson 2002, p. 106), the research that has addressed this question in fact clearly supports the position that individual men's attitudes toward women affect the likelihood that they will be involved in intimate terrorism. One example is Holtzworth-Munroe's work that shows that both of her two groups of intimate terrorists are more hostile toward women than are either non-violent men or men involved in situational couple violence (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe et al. 2000). More generally, Sugarman and Frankel (1996) conducted a thorough review of the research on this question, using a statistical technique that allowed them to combine the findings of all of the studies that had been published up to that time. While

Holtzworth-Munroe demonstrated an effect of *hostility* toward women, Sugarman and Frankel focused on the effects of men's attitudes toward the role of women in social life, and found that traditional men were more likely to be involved in attacks on their partners than were non-traditional men. The details of the Sugarman and Frankel review provide further support for the important role of attitudes toward women in intimate terrorism. They found that men's attitudes toward women were much more strongly related to violence in studies using samples that were dominated by intimate terrorism than in studies that were dominated by situational couple violence. Of course, this is exactly what a feminist theory of domestic violence would predict. It is intimate terrorism that involves the attempt to control one's partner, an undertaking supported by traditional or hostile attitudes toward women.

Third, at the level of social interaction rather than individual attitudes, our cultures of masculinity and femininity ensure that whatever the level of violence, its meaning will differ greatly depending upon the gender of the perpetrator (Straus 1999). When a woman slaps her husband in the heat of an argument, it is unlikely to be interpreted by him as a serious attempt to do him physical harm. In fact, it is likely to be seen as a quaint form of feminine communication. Women's violence is taken less seriously, is less likely to produce fear, and is therefore less likely either to be intended as a control tactic or to be successful as one (Swan and Snow 2002).

Fourth, general social norms regarding intimate heterosexual partnerships, although certainly in the midst of considerable historical change, are heavily gendered and rooted in a patriarchal heterosexual model that validates men's power (Dobash and Dobash 1979, 1992; Yllö and Bograd 1988). These norms affect the internal functioning of all relationships, regardless of the individual attitudes of the partners, because couples' social networks are often involved in shaping the internal workings of personal relationships (Klein and Milardo 2000). When those networks support a male-dominant style of marriage or a view of marriage as a commitment "for better or worse," they can contribute to the entrapment of women in abusive relationships.

Finally, the gendering of the broader social context within which the relationship is embedded affects the resources the partners can draw upon to shape the relationship and to cope with or escape from the violence. For example, the gender gap in wages can create an economic dependency that enhances men's control over women and contributes to women's entrapment in abusive relationships. The societal assignment of caregiving responsibilities primarily to women further contributes to this economic dependency, placing women in a subordinate position within the family, and creating a context in which institutions such as the church that could be a source of support for abused women instead encourage them to stay in abusive relationships—for the sake of the children or for the sake of the marriage. Then there is the criminal justice system, heavily dominated by men, and involving a culture of masculinity that has not always been responsive to the problems of women experiencing intimate terrorism, which was often treated as if it were situational couple violence (Buzawa 2003). On a more positive note, there have been major changes in all of these systems as a result of the women's movement in general, and the battered women's movement in particular (Dobash and Dobash 1992). These changes

are probably a major source of the recent dramatic decline in non-fatal intimate partner violence against women and fatal intimate partner violence against men in the United States (Rennison 2003).¹

What About Situational Couple Violence?

It is not surprising that the institution of gender, in which male domination is a central element, is implicated in the structure of intimate terrorism, which is about coercive control. In contrast, situational couple violence, which is the most common type of partner violence, does not involve an attempt on the part of one partner to gain general control over the other, and by some criteria it appears to be more gender-symmetric. The violence is situationally-provoked, as the tensions or emotions of a particular encounter lead one or both of the partners to resort to violence. Intimate relationships inevitably involve conflicts, and in some relationships one or more of those conflicts turns into an argument that escalates into violence. The violence may be minor and singular, with one encounter at some point in the relationship escalating to the level that someone pushes or slaps the other, is immediately remorseful, apologizes and never does it again. Or the violence could be a chronic problem, with one or both partners frequently resorting to violence, minor or severe, even homicidal. In general, there is considerable variability in the nature of situational couple violence, a variability that has not yet been explored adequately enough to allow us to make confident statements about its causes.

¹ It is important to note that this discussion of gender is relevant only to heterosexual relationships. In same-sex relationships, some aspects of gender may still be important (e.g., gender differences in attitudes toward and experience with violence might produce more violence in gay men's relationships than in lesbian relationships), others will be largely irrelevant (e.g., gay and lesbian relationship norms are more egalitarian, and sex differences in size and strength will be less likely to be significant), and some will play themselves out in quite different ways (e.g., reactions of the criminal justice system may be affected by officers' attitudes toward gay men and lesbians). Although we know considerably less about same-sex relationships than we do about heterosexual relationships, there is a growing literature that is important not only in its own right, but also because it sheds light on some of the inadequacies of theories rooted in research on heterosexual relationships (Renzetti 1992, 2002; Renzetti and Miley 1996).

Nevertheless, some researchers *have* made confident statements about one aspect of situational couple violence—its gender symmetry, a symmetry that in my view is mythical. The myth of gender symmetry in situational couple violence has been supported by the widespread use of a particularly meaningless measure of symmetry (incidence). Respondents in a survey are presented with a list of violent behaviors ranging from a push or a slap to an attack with a weapon. They are then asked to report how often they have committed each violent act against their partner (or their partner against them) in the previous twelve months. “Incidence of partner violence” is then defined as the percentage of a group (e.g., men or women) who have committed the act (or some set of the acts, often identified as mild or severe violent acts) at least once in the previous twelve months. The much touted gender symmetry of situational couple violence is gender symmetry only in this narrow sense. For example, in the 1975 National Survey of Family Violence that initiated the gender symmetry debate 13% of women and 11% of men had committed at least one of the acts listed in the Conflict Tactics Scales (Steinmetz 1977-78). However, by any sensible measure of the nature of the violence, such as the specific acts engaged in, the injuries produced, the frequency of the violence, or the production of fear in one’s partner, intimate partner violence (even situational couple violence) is not gender-symmetric (Archer 2000; Brush 1990; Hamberger and Guse 2002; Johnson 1999; Morse 1995; Tjaden and Thoennes 2000).

Thus, although situational couple violence may not be as gendered as intimate terrorism and violent resistance which both involve the patriarchal norms regarding dominance that still influence heterosexual relationships, many of the gender factors discussed above are also implicated in the patterning of situational couple violence. For example, in situational couple violence the likelihood of injury or fear is influenced by size differences. A slap from a woman is still perceived as an entirely different act than is one from a man. Most importantly, our cultures of masculinity and femininity contribute to the couple communication problems that are often associated with situational couple violence (Johnson in press).

Policy and Intervention

Different problems require different solutions. The fact that there is more than one type of intimate partner violence means that to some extent we must tailor our policies and intervention strategies to the specific characteristics of each of the types. Although situational couple violence is much more common than intimate terrorism (surveys indicate that one out of every eight married couples in the U.S. experiences some form of situational couple violence each year), most of our policies and interventions are designed to address intimate terrorism rather than situational couple violence. This focus on intimate terrorism has developed for a number of reasons: (a) the women’s movement has been extremely effective in educating both the public and the criminal justice system about the nature of intimate terrorism, (b) intimate terrorism is more likely to come to the attention of agencies because it so often involves chronic and/or severe violence and because victims of intimate terrorism are more likely than victims of situational couple violence to need help in order to cope with the violence or to escape from it, and (c) the

significant percentage of partner homicides that are a product of intimate terrorism emphasize the need for effective intervention in such situations.

Although conservative men's groups have decried this dominant focus on intimate terrorism because it ignores the violence of women (which they do not acknowledge is almost always either violent resistance or situational couple violence), the safest approach to intervention is to start with the assumption that every case of intimate partner violence involves intimate terrorism. The reason is that interventions for situational couple violence (such as couples counseling) are likely to put a victim of intimate terrorism at considerable risk. If we were to do as one recent article suggested, and recommend counseling that would help couples to "work together to harmonize their relationships" (Fergusson, Horwood, and Ridder 2005), we would be asking women who are terrorized by their partners to go into a counseling situation that calls for honesty, encouraging victims to tell the truth to a partner who in many cases has beaten them severely in response to criticism, and who might well murder them in response to their attempt to "harmonize" (Johnson 2005).

Thus, our understanding of the differences among these types of intimate partner violence suggests that the best strategy in individual cases is to assume intimate terrorism and to work closely with the victim only (not the couple) until it is absolutely clear that the violence is situational couple violence. In the shelter movement, which for the most part works on a feminist empowerment model, this means working with the victim on coping with the violence within the relationship, providing safe temporary shelter, involving the courts through arrest or protection from abuse orders, developing a safety plan for the immediate future, and—if the victim so wishes—developing the strategies and resources needed to escape from the relationship safely.

How can we as a society work to reduce the incidence of intimate partner violence? First, we need to send the message that violence against intimate partners will not be tolerated. Arrest and prosecution would send that message both to the general public and to the individuals who are arrested. Second, the educational programs about relationship violence that have been developed in the battered women's movement and presented in many school districts around the country could become a regular part of our school curricula, teaching children and adolescents about equality and respect in our personal relationships. Finally, we can work to increase support for programs in hospitals, shelters, and the courts that screen for intimate partner violence and help its victims either to stop the violence or to escape from it safely.

References

- Archer, John. 2000. Sex differences in aggression between heterosexual partners: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin* 126 (5):651-680.
- Brush, Lisa D. 1990. Violent acts and injurious outcomes in married couples: Methodological issues in the National Survey of Families and Households. *Gender & Society* 4 (1):56-67.
- Buzawa, Eva Schlesinger. 2003. *Domestic Violence: The Criminal Justice Response*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Campbell, Jacquelyn C., Linda Rose, Joan Kub, and Daphne Nedd. 1998. Voices of strength and resistance: A contextual and longitudinal analysis of women's responses to battering. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 13 (6):743-762.
- Dobash, R. Emerson, and Russell P. Dobash. 1979. *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against Patriarchy*. New York: Free Press.
- . 1992. *Women, Violence and Social Change*. New York: Routledge.
- Felson, Richard. 2002. *Violence and Gender Reexamined*: American Psychological Association.
- Fergusson, David M., L. John Horwood, and Elizabeth M. Ridder. 2005. Partner violence and mental health outcomes in a New Zealand birth cohort. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67 (5):1103-1119.
- Ferree, Myra Marx. 1990. Beyond separate spheres: Feminism and family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52 (4):866-884.
- Ferree, Myra Marx, Judith Lorber, and Beth B. Hess. 2000. Introduction. In *Revisioning Gender*, edited by M. M. Ferree, J. Lorber and B. B. Hess. Walnut Creek, CA: Alatomira.
- Graham-Kevan, Nicola, and John Archer. 2003. Intimate terrorism and common couple violence: A test of Johnson's predictions in four British samples. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 18 (11):1247-1270.
- . 2003. Physical aggression and control in heterosexual relationships: The effect of sampling. *Violence and Victims* 18 (2):181-196.
- Hamberger, L. K., and C. E. Guse. 2002. Men's and women's use of intimate partner violence in clinical samples. *Violence against Women* 8 (11):1301-1331.
- Holtzworth-Munroe, Amy, Jeffrey C. Meehan, Katherine Herron, Uzma Rehman, and Gregory L. Stuart. 2000. Testing the Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) batterer typology. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 68:1000-1019.
- Johnson, Michael P. 1995. Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: Two forms of violence against women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57 (2):283-294.
- . 1999. Two types of violence against women in the American family: Identifying patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence. Paper read at National Council on Family Relations annual meeting, November, at Irvine, CA.
- . 2001. Conflict and control: Symmetry and asymmetry in domestic violence. In *Couples in Conflict*, edited by A. Booth, A. C. Crouter and M. Clements. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- . 2005. Domestic violence: It's not about gender--Or is it? *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67 (5):1126-1130.
- . in press. Gendered communication and intimate partner violence. In *The Sage Handbook of Gender and Communication*, edited by B. J. Dow and J. T. Wood. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kirkwood, Catherine. 1993. *Leaving Abusive Partners: From the Scars of Survival to the Wisdom for Change*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Klein, Renate C. A., and Robert M. Milardo. 2000. The social context of couple conflict: Support and criticism from informal third parties. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 17 (4-5):618-637.
- Morse, Barbara J. 1995. Beyond the Conflict Tactics Scale: Assessing gender differences in partner violence. *Violence and Victims* 10 (4):251-272.
- Pence, Ellen, and Michael Paymar. 1993. *Education Groups for Men Who Batter: The Duluth Model*. New York: Springer.
- Rennison, Callie Marie. 2003. Intimate Partner Violence, 1993-2001. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Renzetti, Claire M. 1992. *Violent Betrayal: Partner Abuse in Lesbian Relationships*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- . 2002. Special issue: Women's use of violence in intimate relationships, part 2 - Editor's note. *Violence against Women* 8 (12):1419.
- Renzetti, Claire M., and Charles Harvey Miley. 1996. *Violence in Gay and Lesbian Domestic Partnerships*. New York: The Haworth Press.
- Risman, Barbara. 2004. Gender as a social structure: Theory wrestling with activism. *Gender & Society* 18 (4):429-450.
- Steinmetz, Suzanne K. 1977-78. The battered husband syndrome. *Victimology* 2 (3-sup-4):499-509.
- Straus, Murray A. 1999. The controversy over domestic violence by women: A methodological, theoretical, and sociology of science analysis. In *Violence in Intimate Relationships*, edited by X. B. Arriaga and S. Oskamp. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sugarman, David B., and Susan L. Frankel. 1996. Patriarchal ideology and wife-assault: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Family Violence* 11 (1):13-40.
- Swan, Suzanne C., and David L. Snow. 2002. A typology of women's use of violence in intimate relationships. *Violence against Women* 8 (3):286-319.
- Tjaden, Patricia, and Nancy Thoennes. 2000. Prevalence and consequences of male-to-female and female-to-male intimate partner violence as measured by the National Violence Against Women Survey. *Violence Against Women* 6 (2):142-161.
- Walker, Lenore E. 1989. *Terrifying Love: Why Battered Women Kill and How Society Responds*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Yllö, Kersti, and Michele Bograd, eds. 1988. *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.