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Subject Area - Social Work

Domestic Violence Social

Domestic violence: a brief critical analysis of impact and interventions built on a definitional, historical, and theoretical foundation.

Introduction

The introductory quotation by Desdemona expresses her fear of Othello's rage (Shakespeare, 1604, cited in Meyersfeld, 2003) at the same time eloquently conveying the terror implicit in domestic violence and demonstrating that domestic violence is not a new phenomenon. Neither is domestic violence a rare occurrence. According to the British government, domestic violence affects millions of lives. The following statistics are quoted from the official government website (CrimeReduction.gov.uk, Domestic violence mini-site, 2005):

one in four women and one in six men will be victims of domestic violence in their lifetime with women at greater risk of repeat victimisation and serious injury;

89 percent of those suffering four or more incidents are women;

one incident of domestic violence is reported to the police every minute;

on average, two women a week are killed by a current or former male partner; and

domestic violence accounts for 16 percent of all violent crime.

This essay will demonstrate that the issue of domestic violence is a complex one, much more complex than the term itself might convey. Indeed, domestic violence is complex in terms of its very definition, complex in terms of its theoretical explanations, complex in terms of gender relevance, complex in terms of its effects, and complex in terms of interventions to prevent and deal with its occurrence. The essay begins with a presentation and critique of various definitions for domestic violence, an exploration of the historical evolution of domestic violence as a societal concern, and a discussion and critique of theoretical explanations for domestic violence including consideration of the relevance of gender. This foundation will be used as a basis for exploring the impact of domestic violence upon its direct and indirect victims and the value and efficacy of the current resources, initiatives, and support networks used in combating domestic violence and assisting its victims. Finally, concluding remarks will be presented.

A Critique on Definitions of Domestic Violence

Finding a generally-accepted definition for domestic violence proved to be an elusive endeavor. This may be because there is no consensus definition of the term (Laurence and Spalter-Roth, 1996; Contemporary Women's Issues Database, May 1996; Contemporary Women's Issues Database, July 1996). Each writer seems to define the term to fit his or her topic or agenda. For instance, Chez (1994, cited in Gibson-Howell, 1996), in focusing on female victims of domestic violence, defines the term as "the repeated subjection of a woman to forceful physical, social, and psychological behavior to coerce her without regard to her rights." Some definitions are basic and general: "a pattern of regularly occurring abuse and violence, or the threat of violence, in an intimate (though not necessarily cohabitating) relationship" (Gibson-Howell, 1996, citing Loring and Smith, 1994). Other definitions are comprehensive and specific (Manor, 1996; Neufield, 1996; Asian Pages, 1998; Josiah, 1998; Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 1999; Danis, 2003; Verkaik, 2003). The more comprehensive

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definitions, although phrased differently, typically possess the following common elements:

a pattern of abusive behavior (as contrasted to a single event);
the abusive behavior involves control, coercion, and/or power;
the abusive behavior may be physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and/or financial; and
the victim of the abusive behavior is a cohabitating or non-cohabitating intimate partner or spouse.

The British government has adopted one of the more expansive descriptions of domestic violence, one that includes all of the foregoing elements: "Any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality." Beyond the basic definition, the government furnishes further description of domestic violence as "a pattern of abusive and controlling behaviour" by which the abuser attempts to gain power over the victim. The government contends that domestic violence crosses age, gender, racial, sexuality, wealth, and geographical lines. (CrimeReduction.gov.uk, Domestic violence mini-site, 2005) Interestingly, the definition offered by the government expands the description to include other "family members" in addition to "intimate partners."

Historical Evolution of the Recognition of Domestic Violence as a Societal Concern

The issue of domestic violence, particularly violence against female spouses, was a topic of societal concern dating from the first marriage law instituted by Romulus in 75 B.C. But the concern was not in preventing domestic violence; to the contrary; the concern was in support of "wife beating"—legally and institutionally—a condition that existed through the early twentieth century. (Danis, 2003, citing Dobash and Dobash, 1979). English common law, until the late nineteenth century, "structured marriage to give a husband superiority over his wife in most aspects of the relationship." This "sanctioned superiority" gave the husband the right to "command his wife's obedience, and subject her to corporal punishment or 'chastisement' if she defied his authority." (Tuerkheimer, 2004, citing Siegel, 1996) The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the dismantling of laws specifically condoning control and violence; however, the laws were not replaced by codes that protected victims from abuse. Instead, "marital privacy" became the standard. Essentially, abuse was considered to be a family problem, not one in which society had an interest. (Turekheimer, 2004)

Not until the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was public interest in domestic violence piqued (Danis, 2003, citing Schechter, 1982). With little public or private funding, feminist activists set up shelters for female victims of domestic violence. They also pressed for laws to punish offenders and promoted training of social workers and other professions to recognize domestic violence and treat its victims. (Contemporary Women's Issues Database, May 1996). From these humble beginnings, over the last thirty-plus years, public awareness has been enhanced dramatically, increasing amounts of public and private funding have been allocated for shelters, domestic violence laws have been strengthened, and social workers and other professionals (e.g. school personnel, healthcare professionals, police officers) have been trained to recognize signs of, and provide treatment to those affected by, domestic violence.

Today, in the early years of the new millennium, the way in which society views domestic violence is continuing to evolve. Physical abuse of wives was the initial focus of intervention initiatives. Drawing on research presented earlier, sexual, emotional, psychological, and financial abuse have been added to physical abuse as types of domestic violence. And, many definitions of victims of domestic violence now include, in addition to wives, husbands and domestic partners of the same or different sex. Increasingly, too, children in the domestic arrangement are being included as victims of domestic violence.

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Theoretical Explanations for Domestic Violence and the Relevance of Gender

Just as there is a lack of consensus on a single definition for domestic violence, “there is no single recognized causal theory for domestic violence.” In the absence of a single theory, at least four theories are used to explain why domestic violence occurs: social exchange/deterrence, social learning, feminist, and the ecological framework. (Danis, 2003) These theories, with their relevance to domestic violence, will be presented and critiqued in this section. A discussion of the relevance of gender in domestic violence will close out the section.

Under the social exchange theory, human interaction is driven by pursuing rewards and avoiding punishments and costs. (Danis, 2003, citing Blau, 1964). Gelles and Cornell (1985, 1990, cited in Danis, 2003) contend that domestic violence occurs when costs do not outweigh rewards. Costs in this context include the potential for defensive physical action by the victim, potential of being arrested and imprisoned, loss of personal status, and dissolution of the domestic arrangement.

The social learning theory suggests that people learn to be violent by being immediately rewarded or punished after they commit violent behavior, through what is called reinforcement, and by watching the experiences of others, called modeling (Danis, 2003, citing Bandura, 1973). According to some experts, there is a correlation between people who witness abusive behavior in their earlier lives and those who commit domestic violence later. (Danis, 2003, citing O’Leary, 1987).

According to feminist theory, domestic violence emanates from a “patriarchal” school system which assigns men the responsibility for controlling and managing female partners (Danis, 2003, citing Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Yllo, 1993). Under this theory, domestic violence is attributed to a flaw in societal structure rather than to any specific individual male pathology.

Finally, the ecological framework theory, in contending that no single theory can be used in explaining or predicting domestic violence, proposes risk factors for domestic violence and interventions to address it at three levels—the micro level (e.g. batterer programs), the meso level (e.g. police and the courts), and the macro level (e.g. a coordinated community approach). (Danis, 2003, citing Crowell and Burgess, 1996; Chalk and King, 1998).

Each of these four theories offers valuable insight into domestic violence. For instance, the social exchange theory offers a basis for law enforcement and prosecution of offenders; the social learning theory helps to explain why children who witness abuse sometimes grow up to be abusers themselves thereby providing rationale for corrective interventions to “unlearn” abusive behavior; and the feminist theory supports interventions targeted at helping batterers to reform and helping to empower victims. But none of these theories seems to provide a comprehensive foundation on which a comprehensive approach for dealing with the many causal and outcome dimensions of domestic violence can be built. The more integrated ecological framework theory, however, seems to furnish the needed basis for such a comprehensive approach.

Now attention will turn to the topic of the relevance of gender in domestic violence. Historically, as mentioned earlier, wives were considered to be the only victims of domestic violence. Today, husbands as well as same- or different-sex non-married partners are considered to be victims as well (Cruz, 2003). Although the statistics vary significantly (Leo, 1994),

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some indicating that the same number of men as women are victims of domestic violence (Leo, 1994; Simerman, 2002), most experts agree that women are most often the victims and, when they are victimized, the damage is usually more serious. The indication that women are most often victims has now gained official recognition. The British government contends that, although domestic violence is not restricted to a specific gender, "it consists mainly of violence by men against women." (CrimeReduction.gov.uk, Domestic violence mini-site, 2005)

The Potential Impact of Domestic Violence on Females, Mothers, and Children

According to the Contemporary Women's Issues Database (January 1996), "the most common victims (of domestic violence) are women and children." With the acknowledgement that domestic violence affects men as well as women, the focus of the discussion in this section will be on the potential impact of domestic violence on females, generally, and on females in their role as mothers as well as on their children.

Domestic violence against women can result in serious physical injuries, psychological trauma, and mental strain (Wha-soon, 1994). According to Wha-soon, physical injuries include "severe headaches, bruises, bone fractures, loss of eyesight, nervous paralysis, insomnia and indigestion," and psychological trauma can include "anxiety, a sense of powerlessness, and a loss of self-respect and self-confidence." Psychological effects can lead to suicide in some cases. Winkvist (2001) echoes these psychological effects and adds that battered women are also more likely to experience sexual and reproductive health disorders. Effects are not restricted to those that are physical and psychological in nature, however. Women can be financially impacted as well. Brown and Kenneym (1996) contend that women, in an effort to flee their attackers, may "give up financial security and their homes" in favor of safety.

Mothers may experience additional negative effects from domestic violence. Starr (2001) contends that domestic violence against mothers "is associated with harmful implications for mental health and parenting, as well as for the offspring." According to Starr, mothers who are in an environment of domestic violence suffer worse outcomes for themselves and for their children. Isaac (1997) suggests that abuse of mothers and children are linked, stating that from thirty to almost sixty percent of mothers reported for child abuse were themselves abused.

Hewitt (2002) claims that ninety percent of occurrences of domestic violence are witnessed either directly or indirectly by children. Children can be affected in at least two ways by domestic violence. According to the British government, they can be traumatized by violence they witness against others in the relationship even when they are not the specific targets of the violence (CrimeReduction.gov.uk, Domestic violence mini-site, 2005). According to Hewitt (2002), children suffer low self-esteem, isolation, trauma, and homelessness that they may not manifest until later in life. They may also suffer from maladies such as worry, sadness, focus and concentration difficulties, forgetfulness, headaches and stomachaches, lying, and "poor impulse control," according to Salisbury and Wichmann (2004).

Importantly, there is also a strong correlation between domestic violence and child abuse, a point which reinforces Isaac's position mentioned earlier (CrimeReduction.gov.uk, Domestic violence mini-site, 2005). Edleson (1999, cited in Spath, 2003) takes the same position in stating that "numerous research studies over the last several decades have reported a connection between domestic violence and child maltreatment within families." And, finally, as mentioned earlier, the social learning theory would suggest that children who witness violence learn that violence is an acceptable way to settle disputes. Supporting this, Wha-soon (1994) writes that the "learning of violence causes a cycle of violence."

An Assessment of the Value and Efficacy of Domestic Violence Interventions

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Methods for dealing with domestic violence generally fall into three categories: prevention, protection, and justice (M2 Presswire, 1998). As the terms imply, prevention attempts to avert incidences of domestic violence through methods such as education and counseling; protection involves attempts to prevent further injury through methods such as removing victims from the situation and ordering offenders to stay away from their victims; and justice involves retribution against domestic violence offenders.

The value and efficacy of prevention, protection, and justice methods used in dealing with domestic violence are difficult to measure. A reason for this was mentioned earlier: the lack of a consensus definition for domestic violence itself. (Contemporary Women's Issues Database, May 1996). Nevertheless, there has been some attempt at measuring performance anecdotally. According to the Contemporary Women's Issues Database (April 1993): "Currently, the two most common forms of social intervention are mechanisms that help her to leave (such as emergency shelters) and having him arrested...(but) neither of these interventions is ideal." And, police and judicial interventions do not seem to fair much better as illustrated by the case of Samuel Gutierrez who killed his domestic partner, Kelly Gonzalez, in Chicago, Illinois in the United States after multiple beatings, arrests, and various court interventions (Hanna, 1998).

That domestic violence still exists as such a serious social problem is probably the best evidence that current methods for preventing it, protecting its victims, and exacting justice on offenders are not working especially well. Perhaps the future will be brighter. Newer perspectives, such as that offered by the ecological framework theory, offer some hope. It seems that taking a comprehensive, integrated approach could potentially be substantially more effective as the various public and private components work together in a cooperative, synergistic arrangement with one goal—the welfare of the potential or actual victim. One expert even suggests that this combined public-private approach could be enhanced further by adding a third component—the family (nuclear family, extended family, intimate family, close relationships)—to the formal, integrated support arrangement (Kelly, 2004).

Conclusion

Public and private organizations continue to increase their attention to domestic violence. In the United Kingdom, The Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 furnishes greater authority to police and the courts in dealing with cases of domestic violence and in providing protection to victims. Additionally, the British government's recently issued national domestic violence action plan sets forth ambitious goals (CrimeReduction.gov.uk, Domestic Violence, 2005) quoted as follows:

- reduce the prevalence of domestic violence;
- increase the rate that domestic violence is reported;
- increase the rate of domestic violence offences that are brought to justice;
- ensure victims of domestic violence are adequately protected and supported nationwide; and
- reduce the number of domestic violence related homicides.

Returning to the introductory quotation, had Shakespeare's Desdemona been alive today, perhaps she would have some hope that she would not forever be in such great fear of Othello's rage.

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