

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN'S USE OF NON-LETHAL VIOLENCE IN INTIMATE HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

**Applied Research Forum of the
National Resource Center on Domestic Violence**

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This important article examines the use of non-lethal violence by women. Dr. Dasgupta examines women in heterosexual relationships and the reasons that they use violence that does not result in the death of their partner.

She begins by discussing the different definitions of “battering.” Some definitions of battering focus on patterns of intimidation, control and oppression (for example, Pence and Paymar, ‘93, or Stark, ‘96), while others (e.g. Straus, ‘99) argue that battering is more accurately defined as “physical assault only.” Straus, according to Dasgupta, argues that these two definitions have two different moral agendas: the first being to end the oppression of women regardless of the form of oppression, while the second more narrow definition seeks to end all forms of physical assaults regardless of the gender of the perpetrator or victim. He goes on to suggest that these distinct definitions should be maintained.

Dasgupta suggests that the way battering is defined has implications on the systematic responses to domestic violence that are developed. The definition of battering also has implications for “batterers treatment” which leads to the following questions: 1) Are women who assault their heterosexual partners different from male batterers? And 2) How are women who assault different from male batterers?

She goes on to clarify that the question is not whether or not women are as capable as men of perpetrating violence, but rather women’s use of violence “is comparable to men’s in terms of context, motivation, results and consequences.”

Review of Research

Dr. Dasgupta examines the research that has been done on intimate abuse. The large-scale, quantitative studies that have examined the gender neutrality of intimate abuse is based largely on the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, ‘79) or the revised version (CTS2 by Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, ‘96). Even in these studies, women are consistently found to suffer more and more serious injuries than do men. The major critique of the CTS and CTS2 is they do not allow for context or motives, and that they ignore the influence of culture and ethnicity.

Other researchers have examined women’s use of violence primarily as a self-defense tactic (e.g. Dobash and Dobash, ‘92, Hamburger, ‘97, Dasgupta, ‘99). “Self-defense” as it is legally defined, however, may not explain all instances of a women’s use of violence – especially when there is not “imminent” threat.

Other studies have come up with a variety of other reasons for women’s assaultive behaviors: retaliation for past hurt, gaining emotional attention, expressing anger, reacting to frustration or stress (Follingstand, Wright & Sebastian, ‘91; Fiebert and Gonzales, ‘97; Hamberger et al, ‘97).

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An Ecological View

In this report, Dasgupta suggests that any of these explanations of women's use of violence fails to account for the complexities of women's lives. She supports a "broad theoretical perspective that considers the interactions of social, historical and institutional, as well as individual variables in women's violence..." (p. #5). She goes on to explore 5 interactive levels that fit under an ecological perspective: Individual level, Microsystem level, Mesosystem level, Exosystem level and the Macrosystem level.

The Individual level examines motivations that may come from the person's childhood socialization, past experiences and personal perceptions. Motivations for violence from this level include self-defense, retaliation, demanding attention, expressing anger, escape and punishment.

The Microsystem level examines the women's history of abuse (which may cut across several relationships). Self-defense is the most common motivation of abuse found under this category as well as perceived threats against themselves, their children or others.

The Mesosystem level explores the interactions of the individual's various Microsystems (i.e. family, work, church). The interactions of these systems and the way that intervene with her has implications for her experience of being abused as well as on her motivations to use violence.

The Exosystem level involves the interaction of the individual with societal systems and institutions (hospitals, health and mental health care, shelters, the law). The most consequential institution on battered women's lives has been the legal system, with the rise in use of pro and mandatory arrest policies resulting in an increase in the number of women arrested for their use of violence. The "incident focus" of the legal systems contributes significantly to this problem. The way that these institutions, especially the legal systems, respond to domestic violence in general and the woman in particular has grave implications for her choices which in turn has implications for her motivations to use violence.

The Macrosystem level is the cultures from which the woman comes and which impact on her life. Feminist structural theorists argue that all women who live in patriarchal cultures are limited by the female gender-roles which have an impact on how women respond to domestic violence. In addition, different cultures have different norms around women's use of violence and these cultural influences have an impact on women's motivations in using violence.

Discussion

Women and men's use of violence towards heterosexual partners is "historically, culturally, motivationally, and situationally distinct. In addition, the consequences of these actions are different" (p. #7). Women recognize their use of violence as a violation of their prescribed gender roles and more readily confess whereas men deny their use of violence and blame the victim, reflecting a greater sense of entitlement to use such behaviors.

Although both genders use violence to achieve control, women more often try to secure short-term command over immediate situations, whereas men tend to establish widespread authority or domination over the life of the relationship.

Men's violence strikes prolonged fear in their partners whereas women's violence does not.

In most cases, women are not able to control either the violence against themselves nor modify their partners abusive behaviors, rather women's attempts to modify their partners abusive behaviors often increases their vulnerability.

Systems tend to respond to women and men's use of violence in similar fashions failing to take into account the differences between the motivations and the harm caused.

"In conceptualizing a battered woman, society has construed her as a passive and helpless person, who is too paralyzed by the abuse to take any actions on her own behalf. Yet even the most subservient and fearful battered woman deploys shrewd survival strategies on a daily basis to keep her children and herself alive" (p.# 7) (See also Gondolf, and Fisher, 1988).

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