

Editorial

Global understandings of domestic violence

GLOBAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Violence that occurs in intimate partner relationships covers a range of terms, including “domestic violence”, “domestic abuse”, “spousal abuse”, “battering”, “intimate partner violence”, “family violence”, and “dating abuse”. This article outlines the historical development of these terms; reviews key debates in relation to definitions; and finally, discusses implications for research and health practice in the field.

PATRIARCHAL INFLUENCES ON SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

Understandings of domestic violence sit within historical and cultural understandings of marriage and family. Historically, patriarchal views of heterosexual relationships have influenced familial constructs in most parts of the world, with patriarchy generally understood as “a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it” (Oxford Dictionary Online, viewed 14 September, 2014, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/patriarchy>). Within the lens of patriarchy, a continuum exists for conduct of relationships between men and women; at one end of this continuum is the commonly accepted idea that husbands have a right to discipline their wives without risk of state intervention (Stark, 2007). Women’s subservience to their husbands, existence as the property of their husbands, and the privacy of family matters are other patriarchal tenets of family operation.

Women’s existence as the property of their husbands comes from legal constructs of marriage derived from property law, under which in the main women were seen to be dependents of men, without legal capacity. For example, English common law recognized the husband as the family’s sole arbiter leading to the expression that “in law husband and wife are one person and the husband is that person” (Graycar & Morgan, 1990, p. 114).

The history of these institutional structures, which were embedded in hetero-normative ideas of patriarchy and articulated in legal constructs of marriage, have often resulted in male voices dominating over female voices in economic, sexual, intellectual, cultural, spiritual, and emotional spheres of influence within the family (Pence & Dasgupta, 2006, p. 6). The acceptance of dominance of men can lead to domestic violence and other forms of violence within the family household.

Krug *et al.* (2002, p. 97) identify an emerging consensus “that an interplay of personal, situational, social and cultural factors combine to cause abuse”. This ecological framework was first proposed by Heise in 1998 (as quoted

in Krug *et al.*, 2002), highlighting the multiple factors contributing to violence. These factors include male dominance in the family, traditional gender norms (such as the belief that women are best equipped to care for children), structural inequalities between men and women (such as pay differences based on gender), sanctions on women assuming non-traditional roles (such as negative comments made to female engineering students), social norms supportive of violence (such as an emphasis on male aggression and conquest), and weak community sanctions against domestic violence (Krug *et al.*, 2002). While the research of Krug *et al.* (2002) does not identify patriarchy as such, these factors are all associated with patriarchal constructs of relationships. Understanding the gendered nature of domestic violence is important because of these associations with patriarchy and because “domestic violence occurs in all countries irrespective of social, economic, religious or cultural group” (Krug *et al.*, 2002, p. 89).

INFLUENCE OF THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT ON THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

With the emergence of feminist movements, a new range of terms emerged to name the experience of violence in intimate relationships, giving voice to many women’s experience of “the tyranny of private life” (Herman, 1992, p. 28) and to reflect the diversity of intimate relationships in which women live. Since the 1970s, recognition has grown that domestic violence is not solely a private matter, but a significant issue of public concern (Murray & Powell, 2011). In the 1980s in the USA, “battering” became the term used to signify a pattern of coercive control, intimidation, and oppression that women often experienced at the hands of their partners (Pence & Dasgupta, 2006). With usage, this term came to be used more specifically to denote physical violence. Across the literature, “domestic violence” emerged as a term used to highlight abuse that was happening in the domestic sphere, a supposedly safe haven. In Australia, the term “domestic violence” has a long history of being associated with gender inequality, and is favored because it allows the issues of children to be included within its purview (Laing *et al.*, 2013).

Almeida and Durkin’s (1999, p. 313) useful definition of domestic violence highlights coercion and control defining it as:

The patterned and repeated use of coercive and controlling behavior to limit, direct and shape a partner’s thoughts, feelings and actions. An array of power and control tactics is used along a continuum in concert with one another. These tactics include physical abuse, emotional abuse, economic abuse, threats and intimidation,

isolation and entrapment, sexual abuse and exploitation, control and abuse of children, and isolation through job location and language barriers.

“Family violence” is another term that has emerged, and is often preferred in communities where there are prominent extended family connections, such as indigenous communities or families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This is in recognition that family violence is more broad than intimate partner violence and that it impacts on a wide range of kin and community members.

“Intimate partner violence” (IPV) is another term that is used internationally. It is the term used by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2013a, p. vii) and specifically refers to:

Behaviour by an intimate partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours.

IPV is part of the broader term “violence against women”, which the United Nations (1993, p. 3) defines in Article 1 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women as:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

Article 2 of this Declaration outlines the range of behaviors included in violence against women as intimate partner violence, sexual violence by someone other than a partner, female genital mutilation, honor killings, and the trafficking of women (United Nations, 1993).

The terms “domestic violence” and “IPV” are used here interchangeably. Related to this definitional exploration is the worrying evidence that many women, and in particular, young women, do not relate their own experiences to these terms. For example, in a study of an Australian state-based routine screening program for domestic violence, many women described the process as giving a new frame to their experiences. Prior to being asked about recent exposure to domestic violence in a health setting, the women reported that they previously conceptualized the abuse as “normal” or something that came “out of the blue” (Spangaro *et al.*, 2011, p. 157). A multimedia information resource recently developed in Australia for young people, Love Control, uses the term “relationship violence”, because “many young women don’t have a name for their experience and see other terms such as family violence as less relevant to them, or as referring to physical violence only” (Northern Integrated Family Violence Services, 2010, p. 8).

This summary of terminology highlights the complexity of finding a term that entails the control that is typical of most intimate partner violence (Stark, 2010).

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Current debate in the field is focused on how domestic violence is understood (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Hester, 2009;

Allen, 2011; Dragiewicz & Dekeseredy, 2012). There are two main conceptualizations: a gendered or feminist understanding, as outlined above, which is the definition used by the United Nations and WHO. Work in this area identifies that men are more likely than women to perpetrate violence against an intimate partner. This is in contrast to a family conflict conceptualization that focuses on discrete physical acts of aggression (excluding sexual assault) between current partners (Dutton, 2012; Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Straus, 2009, Straus, 2011). The findings of these researchers are that women assault their partners at approximately the same rate as men assault their partners.

In response to these opposing views, a number of studies have focused on how and why male partner violence differs to female partner violence (Allen *et al.*, 2009; Hester, 2009; Gerstenberger & Williams, 2013). The findings highlight that women’s violence tends to be in reaction to male violence, violence used by men against female partners was much more severe than that used by women against men, and that men and women appeared to experience and use violent/abusive behavior in different ways, with violence by men more likely to involve fear by and control of victims.

The work of Evan Stark (2007; 2010) highlights the limitations of research that focuses on single incidents of violence (as gender-neutral approaches do), because it fails to capture the cumulative impact and effects of coercive control on restricting a woman’s life. When the understanding of intimate partner violence becomes focused on physical violence, the key element of coercive control becomes less obvious in women’s understanding of domestic violence (Stark, 2007). Stark argues for creating a criminal offence for coercive control as one way of addressing this.

Works on typologies of violence recognize that domestic violence is not a unitary phenomenon. One typology identifies four categories of IPV: (i) coercive controlling violence (as described in the definition used by Almeida & Durkin, (1999)); (ii) violent resistance (violence used as self-defence when violence occurs); (iii) situational couple violence (violence that occurs as part of conflict in a relationship that is equal between two partners); and (iv) separation-instigated violence (violence that emerges only when couples separate) (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Johnson, 2011). Importantly, this typology differentiates the concept of coercive control from situations of conflict between couples, which does not constitute abuse.

Most significantly, it has been suggested that the fundamental question when examining the complexities of domestic violence is: “Who is doing what to whom and what is the impact?” (Pence & Dasgupta, 2006). A range of studies have looked at the impact of male IPV against women and girls, which demonstrates that the vast burden of IPV in regards to health, development, and economic security is borne by women and girls (Bonomi *et al.*, 2006; Garcia-Moreno *et al.*, 2006; Reed *et al.*, 2010).

EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

A major systematic review found a magnitude of evidence pointing to the association between intimate partner violence and poor health outcomes for women: HIV infection, sexually-transmitted infections, induced abortion, low birth weight, premature birth, growth restriction in utero and/or small for gestational age, alcohol use, depression and suicide, injuries, and death from homicide (Garcia-Moreno *et al.*, 2013). In contrast, men are far more likely to be attacked by a stranger or acquaintance (Krug *et al.*, 2002; Reed *et al.*, 2010; WHO, 2013a). We can conclude that the impact of domestic violence has been found consistently to be much greater for women than for men. Women who experience domestic violence are high users of health services (Krug *et al.*, 2002), but are often not identified as being subject to domestic violence at the time of using the health service, because of the hidden nature of domestic violence (Rivara *et al.*, 2007; Spangaro *et al.*, 2010).

Beyond the health costs, intimate partner violence impacts at an economic level to society, including the cost of service provision in a number of sectors apart from the health sector (such as social service, justice, and police); it reduces women's economic opportunities and decreases productivity, and also has second-generation consequences, given the impacts of intimate partner violence on children and young people (Holt *et al.*, 2008; Klugman *et al.*, 2014).

WHAT DOES THIS OVERVIEW OF KEY ISSUES REGARDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE MEAN FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE?

First, it is important when reviewing research to be clear about what definition is being used and what the implications of this are for the findings. Second, given the magnitude of adverse health outcomes for women who experience domestic violence, it is important that health practitioners have a good understanding of the WHO clinical and policy guidelines for responding to intimate partner violence (WHO, 2013a). In practical terms, there are implications for those involved in health education, particularly the need to address long-held beliefs and assumptions, ensuring that safety for women is at the heart of responses, given the lethal nature of domestic violence. Third, given the gendered nature of domestic violence, it is critical to consider prevention strategies to address the shocking and sobering finding of a recent UNICEF (2014, p. 147) report that concluded that:

Globally, nearly half of adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 think a husband or partner is justified in hitting or bashing his wife or partner under certain circumstances.

Traditional beliefs that support the idea that men have a right to control women underpin intimate partner violence (WHO, 2010) and these beliefs need to be consistently understood, challenged, and addressed to inform effective prevention strategies and programming.

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