CHAPTER 1

Theoretical and Definitional Issues in Violence Against Women

Walter S. DeKeseredy and Martin D. Schwartz

In the first edition of this book, we stated what was obvious to experts in the field: The number of studies on violence against women has increased dramatically in recent years (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2001). Nearly 10 years later, we can easily repeat this observation. Certainly, it is a major challenge to keep up with the empirical and theoretical work on one of the world’s most compelling social problems. That the field’s leading periodical, Violence Against Women: An International and Interdisciplinary Journal, is able to publish monthly is an important statement on the amount of time, money, and effort devoted around the world to enhancing a social scientific understanding of the myriad ways in which women are harmed by intimate partners and strangers in private and public places.

Although new studies are being conducted daily and new theories are being constructed and tested, one thing we do not have is an agreed-upon firm definition of violence against women. As Kilpatrick (2004) correctly points out, the debate about whether to define violence against women narrowly or broadly is “old, fierce, and unlikely to be resolved in the near future” (p. 1218). Similarly, what the authors of this chapter observed more than 15 years ago still holds true: “Right now, there is an important battle being waged over the nature of women’s behavior and its role in woman abuse” (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1993, p. 249). One location for this battle is that many people use language that specifically names women as the objects of abuse or names men as the abusers: They use terms such as “woman abuse,” “violence against women,” and “male-to-female violence.” Others fervently oppose these specific labels and instead use gender-neutral terms such as “family violence” or “intimate partner violence” (IPV),

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often claiming that women are as violent as men in marriage, common-law relationships, dating, and other intimate relationships. One important objective of this chapter is to describe and evaluate narrow, broad, gender-neutral, and gender-specific definitions. The second objective is to review some of the most widely read and cited theories of violence against women.

**Broad Versus Narrow Definitions**

Definitions of violence in intimate relationships are important and warrant considerable scrutiny because of the power conveyed by “scientific” and “political authority” (Muehlenhard, Powch, Phelps, & Giusti, 1992). Indeed, the ways acts are defined have major effects on research techniques, policies, and ultimately, the lives of many people. Further, definitions are used politically as tools in social struggles. Together with poverty, unemployment, terrorism, and other social problems, violence against women is a highly politicized topic of social scientific inquiry, and definitions of this harm reflect this reality (Ellis, 1987).

**Narrow Definitions**

Many researchers, policy makers, journalists, and members of the general public focus only on physical abuse or sexual assaults involving penetration. Psychological, verbal, spiritual, and economic abuse are absent from their formulations for several reasons, including the claim that grouping these harms with physically injurious behaviors muddies “the water so much that it might be impossible to determine what causes abuse” (Gelles & Cornell, 1985, p. 23). Many other proponents of narrow legalistic definitions are political conservatives, who argue that violence-against-women studies are often ideologically driven and are designed to artificially inflate the rates of woman abuse to make political points (Dutton, 2006; Fekete, 1994; Gilbert, 1994). Similar attacks also come from some feminist quarters. For example, Fox (1993) states that “by combining what is debatably abusive with what everyone agrees to be seriously abusive,” the latter becomes trivialized (p. 322). In fact, Fox views psychological or emotional victimization as “soft-core abuse.” Similarly, some researchers (e.g., Archer, 2000), right-wing fathers’ rights groups, and other antifeminists who claim that women are as violent as men do not include homicide, stalking, sexual assault, separation/divorce assault, strangulation, and a host of other harms that thousands of women experience daily in their definitions (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007).

There are some major problems with narrow legalistic definitions. For example, the U.S. National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS) was introduced as a crime and personal safety survey, one that excluded a broad range of hurtful behaviors exempt from the purview of the law (DeKeseredy, Rogness, & Schwartz, 2004; Straus, 2005). Not surprisingly, then, the NVAWS uncovered a very low incidence (1.8% in the previous 12 months) of women victimized by one more of these acts committed by an intimate partner: rape, physical assault, rape and/or physical assault, and stalking (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). The problem is it seems that unless women clearly label hurtful behaviors as “criminal” in their minds, they tend not to report them on a survey of criminal behavior (Koss, 1996; Schwartz, 2000). In fact, many women who experience what the law defines as rape do not label their assaults as such or even as a form of victimization (Littleton & Henderson, 2009; Schwartz & Leggett, 1999). By comparison, when surveys are not operated in the context of criminal assault and victimization, there are major reporting differences (Fisher, 2009). Mihalic and Elliot (1997) found that up to 83% of the marital violence incidents reported in surveys of family behavior are not reported in contexts where the emphasis is on criminal assault and victimization.
Thus, most large-scale representative sample surveys that are not contextualized as crime surveys elicit much higher figures. These often use modified versions of popular measures such as the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) originally developed by Straus (1979) or a rendition of Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski’s (1987) Sexual Experiences Survey. As a general statement, these studies show that at least 11% of North American women in marital/cohabiting relationships are physically abused by their male partners in any 12-month period, and each year at least 24% of North American female undergraduates experience some variety of sexual assault (DeKeseredy, 2009a; DeKeseredy & Flack, 2007).

In other words, if we limit our operational definitions of intimate male-to-female violence to the limited realm of the criminal law and acts that people perceive to be covered there, then we will uncover relatively less intimate violence against women. If we use broader definitions of conflict and violence, the amount of violence uncovered is many times higher.

There are a number of reasons why many researchers, advocates, and practitioners worry about low rates uncovered by government studies such as the NVAWS. Perhaps one of the most important is that policy makers tend to listen only to large numbers (Bart, Miller, Moran, & Stanko, 1989; DeKeseredy, 2000). When narrow definitions are used, some government officials offer these findings as a rationale for withholding funding to deal with the problem (Jiwani, 2000; Smith, 1994). Narrow definitions not only exacerbate the problem of underreporting, they trivialize women’s real-life feelings and experiences. For example, in 30 American states, men who rape their wives are exempt from prosecution in some situations, such as when the victims are physically or mentally impaired (Bergen, 2006), even though marital rape causes much pain and suffering.

Another common worry is that narrow definitions discourage abused women from seeking social support. If a survivor’s male partner’s brutal conduct does not coincide with what researchers, criminal justice officials, politicians, or the general public refer to as abuse or violence, she may be left in a “twilight zone” where she knows that she has been abused but cannot define it or categorize it in a way that would help her or cause her to seek help (DeKeseredy, 2009b; Duffy & Momirov, 1997). As stated by a rural Ohio woman harmed by separation/divorce sexual assault, “I don’t sit around and share. I keep it to myself. . . . I’m not one to sit around and talk about what’s happened” (cited in DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009, p. 49). In a study of rape survivors by Pitts and Schwartz (1993), all of the women who were encouraged by their “most helpful” person to self-blame denied that they had been raped, while all of the women who were encouraged to believe that they were not at fault claimed that they had been raped. As Pitts and Schwartz point out, not only do women who deny their rape fail to seek social support, but too often society “takes away their right to feel angry about it” (p. 396).

Finally, despite great methodological advancements in the field, there is an issue that should be of great worry to quantitative methodologists. We have now seen that narrow legalistic questions elicit fewer responses (Walby & Myhill, 2001). Are the women who do respond in fact representative of all women in the sample, or has the scientific credibility of the entire study been compromised (Smith, 1994)?

**Broad Definitions**

A central argument of this chapter is that how one defines violence is one of the most important research decisions that a methodologist will make (Ellis, 1987). This has been particularly debated in the areas of psychological and emotional abuse. Psychological abuse can be just as injurious as physical violence, if not more so (Adams, Sullivan, Bybee, & Greeson, 2008). For example, Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, and Polek (1990) found that 72% of their abused female interviewees reported that psychological
abuse had a more severe effect on them than did physical abuse. Some, like this rural Ohio woman interviewed by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009), say that most physical wounds heal, but the damage to their self-respect and ability to relate to others caused by emotional, verbal, and spiritual violence affects every aspect of their lives:

I couldn’t care less if I ever have sex again in my life. I could care less if I ever had another relationship with a man again in my life. Oh, it’s scarred me for life. I think it’s physically, mentally, well maybe not so much physically, but emotionally has scarred me for life. You know, and that’s the reason why I don’t socialize myself with people. I isolate myself from people because if I don’t, I get panic attacks. And the dreams they, they’re never gone. They’re never gone. I mean, I don’t care how much you try to put it out of your head; the dreams always bring it back, always. I’ve been in a sleep clinic where they would videotape me sleeping, being in and out of bed, crawling into a corner screaming, “Please don’t hurt me, don’t shoot me, don’t whatever.” (p. 83)

Similarly, many women are harmed in immeasurable ways by sexual assaults that do not involve forced penetration, such as unwanted acts when they were drunk or high or when they were unable to give consent (Bahar & Koss, 2001; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009). Then there are married and cohabiting women who are “blackmailed” into having sex with their partners. For example, one of Russell’s (1990) pregnant respondents went into labor and desperately needed medical attention. However, her husband did not take her to the hospital until she had sex with him. Research also shows that many women have unwanted sex “out of a sense of obligation” (Bergen, 1996) because of ex-partners’ threats of fighting for sole custody of children, or they are coerced into having sex for other reasons that do not involve the use of or threats of force.

Regardless of whether they find psychological abuse to be more damaging than physical harms, women who are the targets of intimate interpersonal violence are rarely only victimized by one type of assault. Rather, they typically suffer from a variety of injurious male behaviors that include physical violence, psychological abuse, economic blackmail, or abuse such as denying the woman money even if she earns a wage, harm to animals or possessions to which she has an attachment, or stalking behavior. For example, 80% of the 43 rural Ohio women interviewed by DeKeseredy, Schwartz, Fagen, and Hall (2006) stated that they were victimized by two or more of these forms of abuse.

Of central concern to a growing number of scholars and practitioners is the problem of coercive control, which frequently involves psychologically and emotionally abusive behaviors that are often subtle, hard to detect and prove, and seem to be more forgivable to people unfamiliar with the abuse of women and its consequences. Two prime examples are threatening looks and criticism (Kernsmith, 2008). Many men also use other tactics of coercive control to suppress their intimate female partner’s personal freedom, including what Evan Stark (2007) refers to as “micromanaging a partner’s behavior” (p. 229). This, then, is another key reason why many feminist scholars assert that we should develop and operationalize broad definitions similar to the one offered below by DeKeseredy and MacLeod (1997):

Woman abuse is the misuse of power by a husband, intimate partner (whether male or female), ex-husband, or ex-partner against a woman, resulting in a loss of dignity, control, and safety as well as a feeling of powerlessness and entrapment experienced by the woman who is the direct victim of ongoing or repeated physical, psychological, economic, sexual, verbal, and/or spiritual abuse. Woman abuse also includes persistent threats or forcing women to witness violence against their children, other relatives, friends, pets, and/or cherished possessions by their husbands, partners, ex-husbands, or ex-partners. (p. 5)
Definitions such as this one are often criticized for including “everything but the kitchen sink.” Of course, including too many behaviors under the rubric of violence may result in a breakdown of social exchanges between people as they label each other’s behaviors as abusive or violent (Duffy & Momirov, 1997). Moreover, it is much more difficult to study 50 behaviors at once than to study one or two. Nevertheless, a growing literature shows that large numbers of abused women reject the notion that “sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” For reasons offered here and elsewhere (e.g., DeKeseredy, 2000), many nonviolent, highly injurious behaviors are just as worthy of in-depth empirical, theoretical, and political attention as those that cause physical harm. Furthermore, physical abuse, sexual abuse, economic abuse, and psychological abuse are not mutually exclusive.

Despite an ongoing antifeminist backlash against broad definitions of violence, a growing number of researchers recognize the merits of these formulations. Consider the U.S. NVAWS (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Despite the problems with this study identified previously, it included measures of stalking, physical violence, sexual assault, and emotionally abusive or controlling behaviors. However, a major problem still remains. Despite the trend toward using broad definitions, we still see variance in incidence and prevalence rates across studies, even when they use similar measures. This problem is due to sampling differences, different data-gathering techniques (e.g., telephone interviews vs. computer surveys), and other methodological factors (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2001).

**Gender-Neutral Versus Gender-Specific Definitions**

The title of this book clearly identifies women as the primary targets of violence in intimate relationships. Many readers obviously support this gender-specific position. Still, since the mid-1990s, the naming of violence against women once again has shifted toward gender-neutral terms (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2009). Some government agencies, researchers, and community groups have reclaimed or reasserted the terms “domestic violence” or “intimate partner violence” as a way of speaking about woman abuse as well as other forms of violence, such as those that occur in same-sex relationships. There are also antifeminist organizations (e.g., fathers’ rights groups), politicians, journalists, and researchers that push for the use of gender-neutral language; they repeatedly claim that women are as violent as men. They do not just advocate more attention to male victims (they usually ignore same-sex victims after claiming that abuse in lesbian couples proves women are just as violent as men). Rather, they demand the renunciation of feminism and the research, laws, and programs they deem feminist (Dutton, 2006; Girard, 2009).

Gender symmetrical CTS data are typically used to support conservatives’ calls for gender-neutral language. For example, in Canada, Statistics Canada’s 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) found that 7% of the women and 6% of the men interviewed for this national study reported at least one incident of violence committed by a current or former spouse between 1999 and 2004 (Mihorean, 2005). These results and similar ones uncovered by studies done in the U.S. and elsewhere (e.g., Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1981; Straus & Gelles, 1986) have been seized upon to support the argument that there is resurgence of what Steinmetz (1977–78) referred to as “the battered husband syndrome” (Jiwani, 2000). According to psychologist Donald Dutton (2006), “in Canada and the United States, women use violence in intimate relationships to the same extent as men, for the same reasons, with largely the same results” (p. ix).

Do bidirectional or gender symmetrical CTS data really show that men and women are equally violent? First, the CTS only provides raw counts of violent acts and thus misses the fact that much
male and female violence is used for different reasons (Jiwani, 2000). As demonstrated by studies that added context, meaning, and motive measures to the CTS (e.g., DeKeseredy, Saunders, Schwartz, & Alvi, 1997), a common cause of women’s violence in intimate relationships is self-defense, while men typically use violence to control their partners (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007). As Ellis asserts, “ignoring context, meaning, and motive is misinforming . . . and not separating different types of violence is misleading” (cited in Foss, 2002, p. A8). In other words, unless we know exactly why people use violence, it is, to say the least, highly problematic to draw conclusions about the causes of such behavior based solely on crude counts of hits, slaps, kicks, and the like.

That some women strike some men, sometimes with the intent to injure, should not be the subject of debate. Still, relying on simple counts of behaviors does not mitigate and change the meaning of the conclusion that women are the overwhelmingly predominant victims of intimate adult violence for several reasons. For example, in addition to ignoring important contextual issues, the CTS or other crude counts of behavior alone cannot accurately determine gender variations in intimate violence because of the following:

- Males are more likely to underreport violence perpetration (Edleson & Brygger, 1986; Heckert & Gondolf, 2000; Hilton, Harris, & Rice, 2000; Szinovacz & Egley, 1995).
- Females are more likely to overreport violence perpetration (Hilton et al., 2000; Szinovacz, 1983; Szinovacz & Egley, 1995).
- Abusers regularly minimize, deny, and justify their violence and abuse (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Buchbinder & Eisman, 2004; Heckert & Gondolf, 2000; Henning & Holdford, 2006; Ptacek, 1999; Totten, 2003).
- The CTS measures only conflict-instigated violence and ignores male violence used to control women or violence that may not stem from any single identifiable cause (e.g., dispute, difference, or spat; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998).
- The CTS excludes several types of abusive behavior, such as forced isolation, separation assault, stalking, and threats to take the children (Jiwani, 2000).
- Surveys based on self-reports of victimization necessarily omit homicide, familicide, and homicide-suicide (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2009).
- The CTS does not take into account fear, dependency, and female devaluation (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 2005; Koss, Goodman, Browne, Fitzgerald, Puryear-Keita, & Russo, 1994).

In addition to using Canadian GSS data and similar findings to support the claim of the bidirectionality of violence, proponents of gender symmetry artificially narrow the definition of violence between intimates to obscure injurious behaviors that display marked gender asymmetry (e.g., Archer, 2000; Dutton, 2006), such as sexual assault, strangulation, separation/divorce assault, stalking, and homicide. Not at all an unacceptable or hysterical broadening of the definition of violence, these behaviors are commonly part of abused women’s experiences (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009).

### Typologies of Intimate Partner Violence and Abuse

Some scholars attempt to explain the gap between gendered and gender-neutral definitions of violence by offering typologies (Johnson, 2008; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000, Pence & Dasgupta, 2006). Within these typologies, the form of violence labeled as coercive control, woman abuse, battering, or as intimate terrorism is qualitatively different than infrequent, noninjurious acts that invoke no fear or coercion. However, studies based on the CTS or other decontextualized measures provide no information that can be used to characterize incidents as representative of one type of violence or another. It is impossible, then, to make accurate claims about the motives of
violence based on numbers of acts (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2009). Certainly, motivations for violent and controlling behavior vary, and even Johnson, who developed the most popular typology, readily admitted that “qualitative research and rich interview data would be necessary to thoroughly understand the meaning and social context” (cited in National Institute of Justice, 2000).

Another problem with Johnson’s (2008) typology is that he claims to identify a very small number of cases that, to him, exemplify “mutual coercive control.” In such cases, he contends that both members of the couple are violent and controlling, each behaving in a manner that would identify him or her as an intimate terrorist if it weren’t for the fact that their partner also seems to be engaged in the same sort of violent attempt to control the relationship. (p. 12)

The main problem with this assertion is that, as Evan Stark (2006) observes, while there is evidence that some women often use force to control their male partners, “they typically lack the social facility to impose the comprehensive levels of deprivation, exploitation, and dominance found in coercive control. I have never encountered a case of coercive control with a female perpetrator and male victim” (p. 1024).

As of yet, typologies are speculative and their application is therefore premature (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2009). Moreover, some critics, like Pence and Dasgupta (2006), caution that typologies are likely to be misused. They further note that it is easy for abusers and their allies to paint individual incidents as “situational” or aberrant violence even when they are not, and that this can have life and death consequences. Although shelter staff and scholars recognize that not all violence is the same and not all violence that takes place in the home is necessarily battering (Dasgupta, 2002; Osthoff, 2002), there is no tool that can discern whether an individual act is part of a broader pattern of coercive control. Accordingly, antiviolence advocates continue to call for assessments that place violence and abuse in the context of the relationship, family, community, culture, and history (Bonisteel & Green, 2005).

**Theories of Violence Against Women in Intimate Relationships**

In one of the most comprehensive reviews of the theoretical literature on violence against women, Lewis Okun (1986) pointed out at least 20 distinct theories of either family violence, woman abuse, or other types of violence in conjugal relationships. Almost 25 years have passed since the publication of his book, and during this time, many more perspectives on violence against women have been developed and tested. Even so, no single theory can fully explain violence against women (Brownridge, 2009). Certainly, we will not review all of the relevant theories here. Instead, we will present the major arguments of some of the most widely used and cited contemporary theoretical perspectives. We begin by turning to psychological approaches.

**Psychological Approaches**

Why do men assault the women they love? One of the most common answers to this question is that these men must be “sick” or mentally disturbed. How could a “normal” person punch, kick, stab, rape, or shoot someone he deeply loves and depends on? The media contribute to the widespread belief that men who assault or kill female intimates are “sick.” For example, the media’s use of quotations such as, “We don’t know what happened” typically makes the cause of death appear inexplicable or the result of a man’s suddenly having ‘snapped’” (Myers, 1997, p. 110). There is also much discussion about the contribution of male personality disorders.
Personality Disorders

Psychological accounts of violence against women are not as popular today as they were in the early 1970s, but several researchers still contend that many men beat women because they are mentally ill, suffer from personality disorders, or consume large quantities of drugs or alcohol. For example, one of Dutton’s (2006) key assertions is that most perpetrators of intimate partner violence have personality disorders and that “this reality has been concealed by misleading theories that wife assault is normatively acceptable, an absurd assertion without empirical support” (p. xi). Dutton further argues that psychoeducational groups, such as the common batterer intervention programs, are highly problematic and therefore, “public policy must be driven by recognition of attachment-based personality disorder as central to therapeutic change” (p. xi).

Certainly, it is difficult sometimes to see men like this one who abused his rural Ohio partner as anything other than sick:

He ended up bringing someone into the relationship, which I didn’t want, but he told me that if I didn’t do it he would leave me. And I ended up staying with him. He was more into group sex and, uh, trying to be the big man. He wanted sex in a group thing or with his buddies or made me have sex with a friend of his. See one time he made me have sex with a friend of his for him to watch, and then he got mad and hit me afterwards. I mean he tied me up so I could watch him have sex with a 13-year-old girl. And then he ended up going to prison for it. So, I mean it was nasty. (cited in DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2009, p. 70)

Does this man suffer from a personality disorder? Perhaps he does, but most abusers do not (Jasinski, 2001). If only a handful of men abused their current or former partners, it would be easy to accept arguments such as Dutton’s. Unfortunately, data presented throughout this book show that a substantial number of women are abused by men in North America and elsewhere. And, it is estimated that only about 10% of male-to-female violence incidents are spawned by mental illness; thus, psychological perspectives cannot explain the other 90% (Brownridge, 2009; Gelles & Straus, 1988). Moreover, widely read and cited data derived from 840 male batterers in four cities who participated in intake sessions prior to program counseling show that less than half of these men showed signs of personality disorders and only 25% showed signs of severe mental disorder (Gondolf, 2003). The author of the study correctly concluded that “there is little evidence for a prevailing ‘abusive personality’ typified by borderline personality tendencies” (Gondolf, 1999, p. 13).

As Katz (2006) notes in his analysis of men who abuse women:

Most men who assault women are not so much disturbed as they are disturbingly normal. Like all of us, they are products of familial and social systems. They are our sons, brothers, friends, and coworkers. As such, they are influenced not only by individual factors, but also by broader cultural attitudes and beliefs about manhood that shape their psyches and identities. And ours. (p. 28)

There are some other problems with explanations that emphasize personality disorders or psychopathy. For example, if violent husbands, cohabiting and estranged partners, and boyfriends are in fact suffering from some disorder, then why do so many of them only beat their wives and not their bosses, friends, or neighbors? Admittedly, many men do attack these others, but men who beat or rape women in intimate relationships generally do not have convictions for violence outside the home. If we are dealing with men who have terrible problems with self-control, how do they manage to keep from hitting people until they are at home alone with their loved ones? How do they manage to exercise
self-control until they are in a situation where they can generally get away with beating someone up? If they are “out of control,” then why do they only beat their partners instead of killing them (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996)? These questions cannot be answered by theories such as Dutton’s (2006) that ignore the unequal distribution of power between men and women in North American society and in intimate or domestic contexts (Bograd, 1988; Jasinski, 2001).

**Evolutionary Perspectives**

Some evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Daly & Wilson, 1988) argue that male violence against women is the result of competition for sexual access to women. The concept of male proprietariness is emphasized in evolutionary thought, and it is defined as “the tendency [of men] to think of women as sexual and reproductive property they can own and exchange” (Wilson & Daly, 1992, p. 85). Proprietariness refers to “not just the emotional force of [the male’s] own feelings of entitlement but to a more pervasive attitude [of ownership and control] toward social relationships [with intimate female partners]” (p. 85).

Men kill not only men, but also women. Why, then, do so many men beat, rape, or kill female intimates? As Kimmel (2000) notes, “to murder or assault the person you are trying to inseminate is a particularly unwise reproductive strategy” (p. 244). Another challenge to evolutionary theory is that many societies have much lower rates of male violence than those of the United States and Canada. So if “boys will be boys,” they “will do so differently” (Kimmel, 2000), depending on where they live, their peer groups, social class position and race, and a host of other factors (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2005; Messerschmidt, 1993).

Because violence against female intimates is an ongoing, ever-changing problem, numerous scholars, practitioners, and activists contend that we must constantly reflect on our past contributions to the field and develop new ways of understanding and preventing the myriad highly injurious and sometimes lethal behaviors that typically occur in private places. Thus, despite the criticisms of the above two perspectives, many sociologists, including those who are feminists, are integrating some psychological accounts into their analyses of how gender and other sociocultural forces influence rape, beatings, stalking, psychological abuse, and the like.

**Social Psychological Perspectives**

Frequently referred to as either process theories (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2004), micro-oriented perspectives (Jasinski, 2001), or as individual-level explanations (Johnson, 1996), social psychological theories focus on the subjective experiences of individuals in large- and small-scale social settings (Ellis, 1987). Social psychology is defined here as “an attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others” (Allport, 1968, p. 1).

**Social Learning Theory**

There are various types of social learning theories, but all of them share one common argument: Violence and aggression are not inherent properties of the individual; rather, they are learned behaviors. The social learning theory that is most often used to explain woman abuse in intimate relationships is the intergenerational transmission theory (Levingson, 1989). Briefly, proponents of this theory maintain that male children are more likely to grow up to assault female intimates if their parents abused them or if they observed their fathers assaulting their spouses (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2005).

The intergenerational transmission theory has some empirical support and is accepted across the political spectrum. However, as Straus et al. (1981) correctly points out, it is wrong to “put the whole burden of violence on what is
learned in the family” (p. 122). For example, many people who were raised in relatively nonviolent homes abuse their female partners and children. On the other hand, there are many people who have directly experienced child abuse or have watched their fathers beat their mothers but who have never beaten their marital/cohabiting partners or children (Barnett et al., 2005). While many children’s violent fathers may be directly or indirectly teaching them to become wife beaters, their mothers may spend a substantial amount of time and effort teaching them that wife beating is wrong and that their future wives/cohabiting partners deserve to be treated much better than they are being treated (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Children are not “hollow beings” who emulate whatever they see. Most of them have a sense of justice and fairness, and many are likely to regard wife beating as “bad” or “evil” (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

This is not to say that the family is not a key “training ground” for woman abuse and child abuse (Straus et al., 1981). However, people also learn violence and other forms of intimate abuse from external sources such as the media and male peers.

Feminist Theories

Unlike the theories reviewed thus far, feminist perspectives focus on how broader social forces such as patriarchy contribute to violence against women. There are different definitions of patriarchy, but it is referred to here as “a sexual system of power in which the male possesses superior power and economic privilege” (Eisenstein, 1980, p. 16). In addition to paying much attention to the ways in which patriarchy is related to myriad male assaults on women, feminist theorists reject narrow, legalistic definitions of violence and favor the broader ones described earlier in this chapter (Renzetti, 2008). It is difficult to review feminist accounts in a few pages because there are competing definitions of feminism and there are many different types of feminism (Maidment, 2006). However, for the purpose of this chapter, we offer Daly and Chesney-Lind’s (1988) definition of feminism as “a set of theories about women’s oppression and a set of strategies for change” (p. 502).

While there are a variety of feminist theories of woman abuse in adult heterosexual relationships, most of them share the view that men abuse women to maintain power and control over them (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Saunders, 1988). Most feminist accounts also assert the following:

- Gender, power, and patriarchy are key explanatory factors.
- Intimate relationships change over time and must be understood in that context.
- It is essential to listen to women’s experiences to develop a theory of woman abuse.
- Scholarship and research should be used to support women (Bograd, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Jasinski, 2001).

Feminists are also united by a deep desire to eliminate all forms of gender inequality and their injurious consequences, such as violence against women. Moreover, the goal of feminist scholars is “not to push men out so as to pull women in, but rather to gender the study of crime and criminal justice” (Renzetti, 1993, p. 232), as well as other social problems (e.g., poverty, unemployment, health care). Gender refers to “the sociocultural and psychological shaping, patterning, and evaluating of female and male behavior” (Schur, 1984, p. 10).

Even today, most experts would agree with Okun’s (1986) assertion that feminism is “the most important theoretical approach to conjugal violence/woman abuse” (p. 100). However, of all the variants of feminist thought scattered throughout the literature, it is radical feminism that has had the greatest impact on the sociological study of woman abuse (DeKeseredy, Ellis, & Alvi, 2005). Radical feminists contend that the
most important set of social relations in any society is found in patriarchy. All other social relations, such as class, are secondary and originate from male-female relations (Beirne & Messerschmidt, 1991). Applied to violence against women, radical feminist theory argues that men engage in this behavior because they need or desire to control women (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988). This statement made by British feminist Jill Radford (1987) exemplifies this perspective: “It is clear that men's violence is used to control women, not just in their own individual interests, but also in the interests of men as a sex class in the reproduction of heterosexuality and male supremacy” (p. 43).

Radical feminists have played a vital role in “breaking the silence” on the multidimensional nature of male-to-female victimization (Kelly, 1988), and they have successfully demonstrated that this problem is “widespread” and “omnipresent” in advanced Western societies and elsewhere (Liddle, 1989). Nevertheless, other feminists have criticized radical feminists on several grounds, including that they ignore the influence of social class and tend to see all men as being equally likely to victimize female intimates (Messerschmidt, 1993). Although woman abuse certainly occurs in all classes and occupations, a large literature shows that some groups are more likely than others to produce batterers, rapists, and other types of woman abusers (Schwartz, 1988).

An interesting methodological debate between radical feminist theorists and other feminists concerns the proper subjects for research on abuse. Most work in this tradition has consisted of in-depth interviews with women who have first-hand experience with violence. An important argument that is a central component of feminist research is the validation of women's experiences. Some critics feel that by not listening to men, but rather to women talking about their experiences with men, radical feminist researchers do not take into account the accuracy of information about men’s motives for violence (LaFlame, 2009; Liddle, 1989). Attacks on patriarchy, according to some feminist critics, would be better conducted by studying the social construction of male offenders (Scully, 1990).

Radical feminism has also been criticized from the right. For example, Dutton (2006), among others (e.g., Gelles, 1993), refers to radical feminist theories of woman abuse as single-factor accounts that have little explanatory value in social science. Radical feminist theories such as Radford’s (1987) are also seen by some conservative social scientists as political agendas and as difficult to verify (Fekete, 1994; Levinson, 1989). However, most feminists have no problem being labeled political, and they hope that their work will help reduce much pain and suffering. There is now a large feminist theoretical literature combining both macro- and micro-level forces, such as unemployment, globalization, deindustrialization, life events stress, intimate relationship status, familial and societal patriarchy, substance abuse, male peer support, and other factors (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007). Today, many feminist scholars strongly agree with what Claire Renzetti (1997) argued more than a decade ago:

Of course, while the causes of and solutions to the problems are not individualistic, but rather structural, we cannot lose sight of individuals. The challenge we confront is to disentangle the complex relationships between individuals and society, including our own roles in this dialectic. A tall order, no doubt, but the only one with any chance of real success. (p. vii)

Integrated Theories

Although there are some prominent scholars who strongly oppose theoretical integration (e.g., Hirschi, 1989) or the creation of what Jasinski (2001) refers to as multidimensional theories, such work is increasingly being done today and here we offer two main examples: DeKeseredy and Schwartz’s (2002) economic exclusion/male
Economic Exclusion/Male Peer Support Model

Feminists point out that some women are more vulnerable than others to violence, including women living in poverty (DeKeseredy, Schwartz, & Alvi, 2008; Holzman & Piper, 1998). For example, in DeKeseredy, Alvi, Schwartz, and Perry’s (1999) survey of six public housing estates, 19.3% of the 216 women surveyed stated that they were harmed by one or more of the listed forms of physical violence. This is much higher than what is found in surveys of the general population. Even so, the possibility exists that this figure for public housing women is still too low, as Renzetti and Maier (2002) discovered in a qualitative study that 33% reported victimization.


Briefly, in their attempt to show how macro-level forces shape male interpersonal dynamics and woman abuse, DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2002) argue that recent economic transformations in North America (e.g., the shift from a manufacturing to a service-based economy) displace working class men and women who often end up in urban public housing or other “clusters of poverty” (Sernau, 2001). Unable to economically support their families and live up to their culturally defined role as bread winner, socially and economically excluded men experience high levels of stress because “their normal paths for personal power and prestige have been cut off” (Raphael, 2001). Such stress prompts them to seek social support from male peers with similar problems.

Such support may help men resolve intimate relationship problems or facilitate the management of their stress, “but there are no guarantees that such a resolution is free of cost” (Vaux, 1985, p. 102). As demonstrated by studies of woman abuse in dating (e.g., DeKeseredy, 1988a; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997), male peer support may alleviate dating life events stress, but it can also have negative consequences for the health and safety of women. For example, DeKeseredy (1988b) found that for men with high levels of such stress, social ties with abusive peers were strongly related to woman abuse in Canadian university dating. Similarly, patriarchal male peer support in public housing promotes sexual assault and other highly injurious “masculine activities” (Raphael, 2001).

The economic exclusion/male peer support model fills several gaps in the theoretical literature on violence against women, but it is not a predictive model. Further, like any social scientific perspective, it can be improved. For example, consistent with integrated male peer support theories of woman abuse on campus and in rural communities (e.g., Godenzi, Schwartz, & DeKeseredy, 2001; DeKeseredy, Donnermeyer, Schwartz, Tunnell, & Hall, 2007), DeKeseredy and Schwartz’s (2002) theory of public housing woman abuse does not specifically address whether members of patriarchal male peer groups are intentionally recruited into these alliances or whether they gravitate to such groups as a way of selectively attempting to sustain or receive support for their earlier acquired values and behaviors. The model also does not specify that men may interact with and be influenced by peers who live away from public housing. Another point to consider is that like every male peer support model, racial/ethnic variations in male peer support dynamics remain to be examined.

DeKeseredy and Schwartz’s (2002) model responds to the call for moving the experiences
of socially and economically marginalized women to the center of empirical and theoretical work on woman abuse (Ptacek, 1999).

Ecological Models

Ecological models address multiple levels of influence and maintain that violence against women should be examined within a nested set of environmental contexts or systems (Brownridge, 2009; Graham-Bermann & Gross, 2008; Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2005). Ecological models include the following levels:

- **Macrosystem**—This refers to broader cultural factors, such as patriarchal attitudes and beliefs about gender relations in intimate relationships.
- **Exosystem**—This concept refers to informal and formal social networks that connect intimate relationships to the broader culture.
- **Microsystem**—This refers to the relationship in which violence takes place.
- **Ontogenic**—This level refers to a person’s individual development and what such development brings to the above three levels. (Brownridge, 2009; Dutton, 2006)

In sum, then, according to ecological theorists, to obtain a rich understanding of why men assault women,

we need to understand the genetic endowments of those individuals, the microsystem in which they grew up, the microsystem in which they are currently embedded, characteristics of the neighborhood within which their family functions (including the availability of social support and social services, and relationships between the community and criminal justice system), and the larger society that embraces all the separate neighborhoods. (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2005)

Ecological models are appealing to many researchers because they direct attention to different levels of analysis and to a broad range of factors that contribute to violence against women (Dasgupta, 2002; Dutton, 2006). Moreover, these models are flexible and can be modified to fit the topic being studied and the scholar’s personal style (Brownridge, 2009; Heise, 1998). However, any ecological model is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to test in its entirety. Conducting a study that effectively addresses all four levels identified here would be “prohibitively expensive” and involve doing sophisticated longitudinal research with a very large sample (Graham-Bermann & Gross, 2008). Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, there has never been an attempt to conduct a study that addresses each of the above levels of the ecological model.

Conclusion

There is sharp disagreement over what constitutes violence against women. There is also a growing number of attempts to explain why women are assaulted by male intimates, some of which were briefly reviewed here. Whatever theory resonates for readers, it is undeniable that the long-term attention given to the issue of violence against women has created profound opportunities for social transformation. At the core of this social change was the act of naming violence as an issue in itself, rather than as a reaction or inevitable outcome of another problem. Naming violence against women by their male partners as a separate problem symbolically transformed women from invisible appendages of male intimate partners to separate individuals (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997).

If defining violence against women is the subject of much debate, the same can be said about theorizing this gendered problem. For example, at the time of writing this chapter, there were heated exchanges between some psychologists.
(e.g., Dutton, 2006) and feminist scholars (e.g., DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007; Gondolf, 2003) about what they respectively assert to be the primary determinants of violence against women. Still, despite the widespread nature of male-to-female abuse, many people find psychological perspectives to be the most appealing because they still believe that violence against women is a function of mental illness and that it can be easily solved through individual therapy or counseling. On the other hand, sociological accounts are not popular among the general population because they call for transforming our social, political, economic, and cultural order (Loseke, Gelles, & Cavanaugh, 2005), which is a more difficult task and challenges those who gain from maintaining the status quo.

For many women, especially those who are battered, psychologically abused, or sexually assaulted, a key point to consider here is whether researchers’ definitions and theories are sensitive to their subjective experiences. The experiences of women who live with abuse or its memories are touchstones for people working to end all forms of violence against women. These touchstones are vital sources of commonality across the varied perspectives that scholars bring to violence against women and its prevention, some of which have been summarized in this chapter (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997).

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Chapter Authors

Walter S. DeKeseredy is Professor of Criminology, Justice, and Policy Studies at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT). He has published 14 books and close to 70 scientific journal articles on a variety of topics, including woman abuse in intimate relationships, criminological theory, and crime in public housing. In 2008, the Institute on Violence, Abuse, and Trauma gave him the Linda Saltzman Memorial Intimate Partner Violence Researcher Award. He also jointly received (with Martin D. Schwartz) the 2004 Distinguished Scholar Award from the ASC’s Division on Women and Crime and the 2007 inaugural UOIT Research Excellence Award. In 1995, he received the Critical Criminologist of the Year Award from the ASC’s Division on Critical Criminology, and in 2008, the Division on Critical Criminology gave him the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Martin D. Schwartz is Professor of Sociology Emeritus at Ohio University. He is a 2008 Fellow of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences and has received distinguished scholar awards from two different divisions of the American Society of Criminology: Women and Crime and Critical Criminology. At Ohio University, he has been named Graduate Professor of the Year and Best Arts and Sciences Professor. In addition, he was named Presidential Research Scholar, an honor that recognizes achievement in research. He has written or edited (often with Walter S. DeKeseredy) 21 editions of 12 books, 70 journal articles, and 65 book chapters, government reports, and essays. Most recently, he coauthored Dangerous Exits: Escaping Abusive Relationships in Rural America (Rutgers University Press, 2009).

Personal Reflection

Evan Stark

Anne Flitcraft and I were introduced to the battered women’s movement in the summer of 1975, when our friend Sharon Vaughan welcomed us to Women’s Advocates in St. Paul, Minnesota, the first shelter for battered women in the U.S. Over the next few years, we hid victimized women and their children in our home and helped open a shelter in New Haven, Connecticut. Starting with Anne’s thesis at Yale medical school, we also conducted a series of NIMH-funded studies that showed that domestic violence was the leading cause of injury for which women sought medical attention and that, after the onset of abuse, battered women were at greatly elevated risk for a range of health, behavioral, and psychosocial problems. We equated abuse with injurious violence and assumed the secondary problems experienced by battered women were the byproduct of this “trauma” as well as of medicine’s failure to identify abuse or intervene appropriately. This understanding guided our thinking through the 1980s, as it did most in the field, and when we fought successfully to reform the institutional response in health, law, criminal justice, and public policy. Most interventions remain predicated on the equation of abuse with episodic violent acts.
Fatal and the most injurious partner violence declined over the next two decades, a major achievement. But overall, levels of partner violence did not decline. Millions of perpetrators were arrested, but almost none went to jail. Shelters and court orders provided short-term protection but few long-term improvements in women's safety. The domestic violence revolution was stalled. A huge gap remained between the strategies men used to oppress women in personal life and the prevailing definition of abuse.

Like so much research since, our work at Yale showed that the hallmark of women's physical abuse is frequent, even routine, but relatively minor assaults extending over a considerable period, rather than the episodic and severe violence targeted by most interventions. But if traumatic violence didn't explain why abused women became “entrapped” and developed a problem profile found among no other class of assault victims, what did? The answer lay in what the women we had sheltered told us: “The violence wasn't the worst part.”

Because I was repeatedly challenged to explain why women had killed abusive partners whose physical violence had not been life threatening, I gradually came to ask about and then to appreciate the full spectrum of oppressive tactics men deploy in 60% to 80% of the cases we see in the justice and helping system. Drawing on the prevailing sentiment among advocates, which had remained marginal to research and theory, I mapped the technology of “coercive control” and sketched an alternative theory of abuse that applied a feminist critique of male domination to the anomalous evidence that had accumulated in the violence paradigm. Coercive control, not violence, explained the unique health profile we had identified among battered women. Abuse was not “gendered” by men’s greater propensity for violence (surveys consistently show sexual differences in partner violence to be minor) but because persistent sexual inequalities enabled men to set violence in the context of an ongoing course of intimidation, isolation, exploitation, sexual degradation, and control. Coercive control was also gendered by its substantive target. If control tactics extended to necessities such as money, mobility, communication, and speech, their principal means were the micromanagement of how women enacted their default roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers, a key element of their inequality. The main harms here were not physical but sociopolitical; they involved what men kept women from doing for themselves by harming their liberty, autonomy, and dignity as well as their physical security. These harms are “invisible in plain sight” because women lack full personhood. Because coercive control crosses social space—explaining why women who are single, separated, or divorced are at the highest risk—and encompasses the range of activities and sites where women live, this is where resistance and reconstruction must begin, in rejoining the struggle for “safety” to the fight for women’s liberation.