



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 24
Issue 3 *September*

Article 9

September 1997

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Recommended Citation

McKendy, John P. (1997) "The Class Politics of Domestic Violence," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol24/iss3/9>

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The Class Politics of Domestic Violence

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The claim is often voiced that wife abuse is a problem that "cuts across" all social and economic lines. Yet there is considerable research evidence suggesting an inverse relationship between wife abuse and the socioeconomic status of both victims and perpetrators. The question of the relevance of social class has generally been construed as a factual one, in principle resolvable by collecting more and better data. Doing a participant observation study of a treatment programme for men who batter, I was forced to bracket the "objective," empirical question, but freed to see how certain ideological practices worked to keep class seen-but-unnoticed. The abstract terms and categories of the dominant discourse of abuse were deployed in ways that subsumed and subdued the men's own experiences of themselves and their lives. In this way the particular local setting was bound to the relations of ruling of patriarchal capitalism. The approaches of "peacemaking criminology" and "restorative justice" offer possibilities for alternative, more effective responses to men's violence against women.

"All women are vulnerable"

The authors of the recently released final report of the Canadian Panel on Violence against Women assert that male violence affects all women:

All women are vulnerable to male violence; all women fear it at some level, are potential victims and suffer pain when struck or when verbally and psychologically tortured; all women look for ways to explain or understand what is happening to them; and all women want to be safe. (Canadian Panel, 1993, p. 25)

Once abuse has occurred, a woman's financial position will determine the "survival strategies" at her disposal (Canadian Panel, 1993, p. 19). The authors also acknowledge that "broader

factors," such as class, culture, race, colour of skin, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities, education, age, language and literacy levels, can affect vulnerability (Canadian Panel, 1993, p. 25).

However, although such characteristics affect the intensity and degree of a woman's vulnerability to violence, they do not alter the conditions common to all women. It is not the "human" condition, rather it is the "woman" condition. (Canadian Panel, 1993, p. 25)

In emphasizing the universal risk of wife abuse, the authors of the Panel Report echo a claim commonly found in the popular media (for example: Hazel, 1992, p. 7; Cox, 1991, p. A8), in briefs and reports of advocacy groups (for example: New Brunswick Advisory Council, 1989, p. 12), in training manuals for social workers, counsellors, doctors, nurses and other professionals (for example: Ontario Medical Association, 1991, p. 1 Pressman, 1984, p. 28–29; Canadian Nurses Association, 1992, p. 5), as well as in the academic literature (for example: Stets, 1988, p. 3–5; Maiuro *et al.*, 1986, p. 287; Freedman, 1985, p. 47; Kuypers, 1992, p. 32).

In narrative accounts of family violence, cases of wife abuse involving victims or perpetrators holding high status occupations are often "capitalized." For example, in a newspaper story titled "Three Canadian Women Die Each Week—At Hands of Intimate Male Partner" (*The Fredericton Daily Gleaner*, December 19, 1991, p. 47), four specific cases are mentioned; the single SES reference identifies the first murder victim as "a young lawyer." Similarly, on the same day as the Panel's final report was released, an article appeared in *The Globe and Mail* titled "Thousands of witnesses offered accounts of abuse"; six women are quoted, one identifying herself as a nurse, and another her abuser as a "psychology professor" (V. Smith, 1993, p. A3). Typically court cases of wife assault receive minimal newspaper coverage; when a case involves a more prominent member of the community, however, coverage is much more extensive. (For example, the April 4, 1995 edition of *The Fredericton Daily Gleaner* devoted 32 column/inches to a story reporting the conviction of a local businessman for assaulting his common-law wife; in the same issue, another case received the more typical 1 column/inch treatment.)

Slippage can often be detected between claims concerning incidence and ones about prevalence. Token, non-controversial

assertions to the effect that "abusers come from all walks of life" commonly serve as implicit warrants for ignoring socioeconomic factors altogether. This blurs the possibilities that (a) the problem may be disproportionately found in certain strata, and (b) the form of the problem, and consequently the effectiveness of various interventions, may be significantly conditioned by class. In the extreme formulation of the universal risk theory, the problem is so pervasive and endemic that any attempt to identify risk-markers is bound to fail. The abused woman is any woman / Everywomen. And the abusing man is any man / Everyman.

The Research Data

Given the frequency with which the universal risk theory has been enunciated, it is jarring to encounter in the research literature fairly consistent evidence that the rate of battering is significantly correlated with socioeconomic indicators such as income level, employment stability, educational attainment, and occupational status of both perpetrators and victims.

On the basis of a telephone survey of 602 married or formerly married women in Maryland in 1977 and 1978, Petersen concludes that "wife abuse is very concentrated in certain segments of society and is not distributed fairly evenly across all strata of society, as the feminist explanation predicts" (Petersen, 1980, p. 400-401).

Data from the Canadian Urban Victimization Survey, conducted in 1982, involving telephone interviews with 61,000 residents of seven Canadian cities, led Johnson to conclude that women in low-income households were significantly more likely to reveal that they had been victims of physical and sexual assault by a spouse or former spouse (Johnson, 1990, p. 173).

Reexamining data from the National Crime Survey of 59,000 households, Schwartz reports a "highly significant relationship" between income level and spousal assault (Schwartz, 1988, p. 376).

Administering the Conflict Tactics Scale to a representative sample of 604 currently or recently married or cohabiting women between the ages of 18 and 50, living in Toronto, Smith discovered that "[t]he chances of a low-income woman being severely abused in the past year, or ever, exceeded those of a well-to-do woman by

a factor of ten" (Smith, 1988, p. 23). Educational attainment of both partners was also negatively related to abuse, as was occupational prestige. Unemployed husbands were almost twice as likely as fully-employed husbands to have attacked their wives during the survey year, and somewhat more likely to have done so some time in the relationship.

Kennedy and Dutton conclude on the basis of a 1987 representative sample in the province of Alberta that household income affected reported rates of wife assault; ". . . households with incomes of \$6,000–16,000 reported overall husband-to-wife violence rates of 13.8%, compared to 7.5% for those with incomes over \$45,000" (Kennedy and Dutton, 1989, p. 50).

Lupri presents results based on a self-administered questionnaire, using a national sample of 1834 Canadian men and women over the age of 18. Using the Conflict Tactics Scale, he calculates that the rate of wife abuse for men with annual incomes of less than \$20,000 was double that for men with incomes of \$60,000 or over (Lupri, 1990, p. 171). Lupri also provided respondents with a checklist of twelve "stressful events" involving negative changes in economic circumstances they might have experienced in the previous five years. The frequency of violence directed towards partners increased with the number of stressful events, from 8% of men who reported none or only one of the events, to 18% of those reporting two or three sources of stress, 19% for those reporting 4 or 5, and 33% for those registering 6 or 7 such sources (Lupri, 1990, p. 172).

According to a 1993 telephone survey of 12,300 Canadian women conducted by Statistics Canada and reported by Rodgers: "Women with a household income of \$15,000 and over reported 12-month rates of wife assault consistent with the national average, while women with household incomes under \$15,000 indicated rates twice the national average" (Rodgers, 1994, p. 6).

Hotaling and Sugarman's review of the research literature led them to conclude that "the bulk of empirical evidence points to a clear connection between wife assault and low family income." They also note that "[t]here is no more controversial finding in the literature on wife assault than that concerning social class or socioeconomic status (SES)" (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1990a, p. 400).

Dealing With the Disjuncture

In the various popular, professional and academic literatures, much is made of the fact that most available data reflect a variety of "biases," such that the actual incidence of family violence in middle and upper socioeconomic groups is underrepresented. Appeals to this argument preserve the theory of universal risk in the face of apparently contradictory evidence. The "class effect" is treated as largely or entirely the result of the lower visibility of the abuse that does take place in higher SES groups (Kuypers, 1992, p. 32; Ontario Medical Association, 1991, p. 1; Stets, 1988, p. 3-4; McGuire, 1991, p. 28; Sherman, 1992, p. 6-7; New Brunswick Coalition of Transition Houses, 1991, p. 6; Gauthier, 1991, p. 27; Douglas, 1991, p. 532-3). Studying victims who have come forward to police or social service agencies for help, or who have taken up residence in shelters, arguably skews the distribution towards an overrepresentation of lower socioeconomic categories. The same can be said of research based on samples of men charged and convicted of assaulting their partners, or participating in treatment programmes in certain kinds of agencies. Presumably reporting-bias entails several more-or-less discrete tendencies: the greater likelihood of lower SES groups availing themselves of legal and social welfare services; the greater capacity of higher SES groups to avoid or minimize such stigmatizing contact; the greater likelihood of higher SES individuals knowing how to access, and being able to afford, individualized, private treatment-situations; the reduced tendency for professionals of various kinds to inquire about violence when dealing with clients who exhibit middle class appearance and demeanour; and so on.

It is sometimes suggested that women from higher SES backgrounds, and particularly women whose social standing is higher than their partners', may actually face *greater* risks (Kuypers, 1992, p. 32; New Brunswick Advisory Council, 1989, p. 12). The hypothesis is that men with lower status than their wives may experience a threat to their control in the relationship, and may resort to violent intimidation to re-establish their dominance.

In addition to the attempts to discount evidence of the relationship between abuse and socioeconomic indicators on methodological grounds, criticisms have been made of the overly

restrictive ways in which abuse has been conceptualized. Physical violence is the most evident and dramatic form, but serious abuse can also take emotional, sexual and financial forms. The universal risk theory is elaborated by positing that while all women are at risk, the forms that the abuse takes may vary by socioeconomic status.

Particularly important is the notion of "emotional" (also called "psychological") abuse. The range of behaviours that can be construed as emotional abuse is very wide indeed, encompassing not only such overt actions as name-calling and insulting, but also ways of relating that involve withdrawal, inexpressiveness and disengagement ("passive aggressive" behaviour). In the "Power and Control Wheel" (originating in the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, and widely used in treatment programmes for batterers) emotional abuse is defined as: "putting her down; making her feel bad about herself; calling her names; making her think she's crazy; playing mind games; humiliating her; making her feel guilty." Lupri *et al.* use the expression "psychological violence" and employ the following indicators: 1. Yelled at the other; 2. Did or said something to spite the other; 3. Insulted or swore at the other; 4. Sulked or refused to talk; 5. Stomped out of the room; 6. Smashed, threw, or kicked something. Interestingly, more than three quarters of their respondents engaged in one or more of these behaviours during the previous year; the researchers decided to narrow their focus to a group of men who committed any of these acts eleven times or more during the year (Lupri *et al.*, 1994, p. 55).

An effort is made to demonstrate that emotional abuse is both widespread and very serious. It can occur in the absence of physical abuse; however when physical abuse does occur, it is almost always accompanied by psychological abuse. Rodgers calculated that three quarters of women reporting physical or sexual abuse also reported emotional abuse, with 18% of women reporting emotional abuse but no physical violence by a partner (Rodgers, 1994, p. 7).

The argument is sometimes encountered that emotional abuse may actually be higher in higher socioeconomic groups. If the overall level of abuse is more-or-less constant, and if there is some evidence to indicate that physical abuse—related to SES,

then it would follow that the rate of emotional abuse should be higher in higher SES groups. Lupri *et al.* (1994) present data to indicate that while rates of physical violence are relatively low among men with university degrees, chronic psychological abuse is more common, particularly among those with graduate degrees (but see Strauss & Sweet [1992, p. 354] who report no significant relationship between SES and "verbal aggression"). This leads the authors to wonder if "emotional hurt" may be a substitute for "physical hurt" among well-educated men. They go on to list three reasons why this question is important:

First, the finding points to the importance of incorporating emotional abuse into our definition of violence. *Restricting the definition of violence to physical assault only tends to overrepresent men of lower socioeconomic status and to underrepresent men of higher status, and thus introduces a serious class bias.* Second, this finding underscores an argument made earlier: emotional violence is another form of victimization that should not be ignored. Third, the finding supports the claim that *violence is considerably more widespread across the socioeconomic spectrum than was assumed previously by practitioners and researchers alike.* (See also the elevated rates of chronic psychological violence among men in the two upper income categories and the rates of those with medium and high SES scores.) (Lupri *et al.*, 1994, pp. 59 and 62, emphasis added)

It seems that often the claim of universal risk functions as an "incurable proposition," preserved in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary by discrediting the research on methodological and conceptual grounds. An incurable proposition is "seemingly formulated as a descriptive assertion," but is actually "a proposition which 'no happening whatsoever would prove false, or cause anyone to withdraw'" (Pollner, 1974, p. 43, quoting Gaskings). Gaskings asks: "If such a proposition tells you nothing about the world, what, then, is the point of it—what does it do? I think that in a sense it is true to say that it prescribes what you are to say—it tells you *how to describe* certain happenings" (Gaskings, quoted by Pollner, 1974, p. 44).

How the classlessness of the problem functions as an incurable proposition can be seen in the following passage, taken from the concluding section of a report of research comparing

domestically violent and non-violent men in terms of several dimensions of assertiveness.

Another issue worthy of comment has to do with the demographic characteristics of the domestically violent males in the present study. Specifically, the range is limited and biased toward unemployed and lower socioeconomic strata. *Although such characteristics are in line with those commonly reported in epidemiological studies of domestic violence [2 citations], domestic violence problems occur across all socioeconomic levels [1 citation], and there is a need to investigate patterns of assertiveness deficits in more broadly sampled populations.* (Maiuro et al., 1986, p. 287, emphasis added)

Instead of drawing some assurance from the fact that the domestically violent sample generally did fit the profile reported in other studies, the authors' acceptance of the claim that "domestic violence problems occur across all socioeconomic levels" warrants the conclusion that additional research with broader samples is needed.

Fieldwork Experience

The disjuncture between the claims of universal risk and the research evidence is usually cast as a factual dispute. Conceived as such, the conflict might be settled by further research, using more sophisticated conceptual models and more rigorous methodologies and sampling procedures. The research I conducted, however, did not allow me to address directly the question of the objective, empirical relationship between class and abuse. My inquiry took the form of a nine month participant observation analysis of a treatment programme for batterers (McKendy, 1992). Abandoning the "factual question," I was better able to take notice of the particular ways in which the issue was talked about, in the concrete setting of my research, and written about, in the academic, professional, political and popular texts I collected. Gradually I moved from a position of hearing assertions concerning the relevance of class as accurate-or-mistaken reports about the "world-out-there," to one in which I could recognize their *performative* character. Guided by the approach Dorothy Smith identified as institutional ethnography, I attempted to discern the

ideological practices that accomplished the classlessness of abuse (Smith, 1987, 1990a, 1990b).

Instead of treating ideology as disembodied ideas about the world, Smith (following Marx) views it as a method, a set of practices whereby abstract conceptual schema are developed by professionals, academics, media personnel, policy makers and administrators, who are removed from the local settings in question, and whose experiences and interests are significantly different from those of the individuals directly involved. Such schema accentuate certain features of situations and attributes of persons, while discarding others. "Mystical" connections among the selected particulars are stipulated so as to mandate certain courses of action, and preclude others. Smith points out the *circularity* of the process:

[A]n interpretive schema is used to assemble and provide coherence for an array of particulars as an account of what actually happened; the particulars, thus selected and assembled, will intend, and will be interpretable by, the schema used to assemble them. The effect is peculiarly circular, for although questions of truth and falsity, accuracy and inaccuracy about the particulars may certainly be raised, the schema in itself is not called into question as method of providing for the coherence of the collection of particulars as a whole. (Smith, 1990b, p. 139)

The concrete actualities of people's everyday lives are made over into the images and categories provided by the abstract schema, transformed into the generalized forms in terms of which they become recognizable and actionable. Smith argues that this is the main way ruling takes place in our kind of society.

From the outset of my research, the vagueness and elasticity of the category of "abuse" troubled me. My concerns were not just intellectual but also personal and political. The relationship between the categories "violence" and "abuse" was imprecise and shifting: sometimes the terms appeared to be used interchangeably; at other times, "violence" seemed to be restricted to overt physical attacks or threats, and treated as a subcategory of the more general phenomenon of "abuse." The variety of behaviours that might be constructed as "abusive" seemed indefinitely expandable. As my work progressed, I had more and more difficulty

taking for granted the notion of abuse as an objective, bounded, stable and measurable category, pointing to a specifiable range of concrete behaviours. At the same time I worried about denying or minimizing the real suffering some individuals experienced at the hands of others.

Sitting in the group, listening to the counsellors catalog the various forms of abuse, and participating in the ritualized self-labelling that began each session, it dawned on me that the abstract category was so malleable that, in principle, aspects of virtually every intimate relationship *might* be construed as "abusive." Every man (if not every person) was *potentially* an "abuser" . . . myself included. And thus every woman was potentially a victim.

The disjuncture I had previously encountered textually I now experienced first hand. Based on explicit disclosures (passing comments concerning jobs, money, schooling, and so on), along with my observations of class-coded styles of speech, dress and appearance, it was clear to me that almost all of the men I saw being caught with the net of "abuser" were working class and poor. (Of the twenty men for whom I obtained direct information, three were unemployed, one was a university student, six worked as unskilled labourers, four in "blue-collar" trades, three were privates or NCOs in the military, one operated a small retail outlet, one worked on a family farm, and one held a semi-professional technical position.) The rhetorically-established *potential universality* of the problem now clashed, not with abstract statistical information extracted from journals and books, but with the *actual, highly particularistic* patterns that I was able to see for myself.

While I was positioned to see the classlessness of abuse as an ongoing practical accomplishment, the counsellors did not see things this way. To them, class *was* irrelevant. Operating inside the "ideological circle," they understood their own activities as being consistent with that "objective fact." The class backgrounds of the men were seen-but-unnoticed. Only when I posed the question directly did one of the counsellors characterize "the majority" of the men with whom he came in contact as "working poor."

At first I was very cautious about this: I was studying one programme, over a brief period of time, using a research strategy that hardly qualified as rigorous! Judged by the standards of traditional sociology, mine was a "case study" with very lim-

ited potential for generalization. It was only by working through Smith's formulation of the "problematic of everyday life" that I acquired greater confidence concerning the general significance of my observations. Smith writes:

The relation of the local and particular to generalized social relations is not a conceptual or methodological issue, it is a property of social organization. The particular "case" is not particular in the aspects that are of concern to the inquirer. Indeed, it is not a "case" for it presents itself to us rather as a point of entry, the locus of an experiencing subject or subjects, into a larger social and economic process. The problematic of everyday life arises precisely at the juncture of particular experience, with generalizing and abstracted forms of social relations organizing a division of labor in society at large. (Smith, 1987, p. 157, emphasis added)

What I was witnessing was not a singular, self-contained setting, fully explicable in terms of the particular interests, backgrounds and idiosyncracies of the participants, and the concrete contingencies they faced. Rather, through such everyday processes as securing funding, hiring and training staff, making and accepting referrals, and establishing liaison with other agencies, governmental departments and community organizations, the setting was organized *extralocally*. Adopting Smith's strategy of institutional ethnography meant that my task was no longer assaying biases that might affect the quality of research data, but rather using the site as a point of entry to delineate broader relations of ruling.

The treatment programme I studied took place in a "family agency" which offered a range of counselling services: one-on-one counselling for emotional problems, traditional marital and family counselling, financial counselling, and, in addition to the programme for batterers, group sessions for the women victims of abuse, children who had witnessed family violence, and sex offenders. Like other "quasi-autonomous non-governmental agencies" ("quangos") that proliferated as governments contracted out health, welfare, correctional and administrative services, funding was extremely limited and precarious: a combination of fees from clients (based on a sliding scale), government programme grants, and charitable donations from community groups. (On "quangos," see Langford, 1983.)

Trained as clinical psychologists and social workers, the counsellors pieced together their programme for batterers by adapting familiar techniques from other therapeutic situations, stitching them together by means of what might be called the "dominant discourse of wife abuse." This discourse the counsellors learned as they went along, attending workshops and conferences, readings various publications and interacting with colleagues. Their actions could be seen as both enabled and constrained by this discourse. They used it in ways that mandated those courses-of-action they were prepared to provide; these centred around anger management, improving communication skills and increasing self-awareness. But the work of the counsellors was not a straightforward "application" of the abstract frameworks and techniques. Routinely they had to call upon their experience, ingenuity and resourcefulness in order to transpose the messy, unique and changing actualities of the men's lives into the abstract forms, and categories in terms of which they could be made actionable as the problem of "wife abuse."

This process was one which in effect subsumed and subdued the accounts the men themselves were prepared to provide. Counsellors were vigilant in detecting and challenging what they saw as the men's stubborn tendencies to deny or minimize the harm they brought their partners, and to shift responsibility to others (often their victims) or to external circumstances. As a method of forcing the men to abandon their self-justifying accounts, the counsellors blocked the men's attempts to contextualize what they had done in ways that conveyed their own experiences of powerlessness. They were only allowed to tell what happened by magnifying their own agency, reconstructing events as outcomes of decisions they had made. Few of the participants were willing or able to recognize themselves as the self-possessed, rational and emotionally self-sufficient individuals the discourse made them out to be. By turns they were puzzled, bored, shamed and angered; rarely were they engaged in the process of rebuilding their lives and transforming their selves.

If what went on in the treatment group was enabled and constrained by this dominant discourse of wife abuse, pursuing the institutional ethnography entailed examining how that discourse was put together.

Conceptual Coordination and Relations of Ruling

Over the decade that spanned the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, the issue of wife abuse was effectively lodged within the "social problems apparatus of the state" (Morgan, 1981). Referring to the situation in Canada (Ontario and British Columbia in particular) Gillian Walker traces the complicated "conceptual politics" which shaped the problem so that it became the focus of official attention and action (Walker, 1990a). Particularly formative was the ongoing struggle between feminist activists working at the grass-roots level, and professionals, located within government agencies, universities, professional schools and other bureaucratic settings. As their positions evolved, eventually a *modus vivendi* was worked out which invoked the framework of criminal law. Walker argues that the resultant "conceptual coordination" did mobilize resources to address the problem, but in ways that absorbed the feminist project within the ruling relations of the capitalist-patriarchal state. The policies and programmes certainly resulted in "more shelters" and "more prisons"; whether they also brought greater safety and justice for women is far less clear.

Feminist activists saw the beating of women by their husbands and boyfriends as a pervasive feature of patriarchal society, part of the "war against women" which also included rape, stalking, sexual harassment on the street and in the workplace, and pornography. This "male violence against women" was cast in highly instrumental terms. Men used a variety of intimidating tactics to maintain their control over women. The everyday/every-night lives of virtually all women were directly or indirectly affected. Even women who had never themselves been beaten or raped were forced to limit their behaviour because of the threat of such violence. Women's vulnerability forced them into greater dependency on the men in their lives, making them susceptible to more subtle forms of psychological, sexual and financial manipulation. This analysis led to the conclusion that while not all men personally employ violence, all can be said to derive some benefit.

This perspective constructed a certain model of men's agency (Liddle, 1989, p. 763 ff). From the point of view of preserving their privileges, intimidating and abusive behaviour took on a

certain kind of rationality. Men had to know what they are doing. Thus they must be forced to accept full responsibility for their behaviour. Nothing should be said or done that might have the effect of excusing them. Explanations which highlighted irrational and expressive motives were suspect.

Likewise questionable were standard sociological models designed to account for the incidence and patterning of domestic violence in terms of interacting cultural, structural and social psychological variables, such as "poverty," unemployment, low levels of formal education, patterns of alcohol and drug use, and inter-generational patterns of abuse. Such deterministic models were seen as "explaining away" the problem by diminishing the intentionality of the male perpetrators. Moreover, when the focus on risk markers included attributes of the women victims, the hint of "victim provocation" brought the charge of "victim blaming." (For a discussion of the ongoing controversy surrounding these issues, see Gelles and Loseke, 1993.)

The politics of victimhood developed "zero-sum" features. To the extent that the men's behaviour was treated as less than fully voluntary, the victimhood of women seemed diminished. It was as though the only choice was *either* to hold the individual perpetrator fully and absolutely responsible, *or* to make his suffering somehow equivalent to or commensurate with that which he had inflicted on another. Bringing up the question of social class seemed to spread the victimhood to men too, and seemed to excuse thus their abusive behaviour.

The tendency for feminists to advocate the universal risk theory was galvanized in their ongoing conceptual struggle with competing claims-makers. Both the positions of Marxists and professional social workers were seen by feminists as "de-gendering" the problem. In order to keep focal the gendered nature of the violence, feminists effectively displaced sociological accounts, and privileged psychological and biological ones. This led to the view described in the first section: that this is something that can happen to any woman, that nothing other than her gender can account for her victimization, and that the profile of the male abuser cannot be specified sociologically but only psychologically or biologically.

Angered when women's experiences of oppression were ignored, trivialized and distorted by men on the left, feminists rejected the analysis that subsumed the problems of sexism and patriarchy under the critique of the exploitative class relations of capitalism, and that sometimes even appeared to romanticize a robust working class masculinity.

More significant in forming the feminist position than the reaction to male-stream Marxism was the confrontation with social workers and members of other "helping professions" who took an increasingly active part in defining and responding to the problems of violence women experienced in their homes. These practitioners named the issue "family violence," thereby associating it with the already established problem of "child abuse." Whereas the feminist framework stressed the pervasiveness—and "normalcy"—of male violence, seeing wife battering in particular as an expected feature of everyday life in patriarchal society, the orientation of social work was to view the problem in terms of individual and social pathology, making it actionable using the well worn "bag of tricks" assembled over the decades of dealing with "family problems" and "problem families." Within the professional paradigm, there was less inclination to characterize interpersonal violence as instrumental and rational, and more to treat it as expressive, irrational and pathological.

The social work perspective traditionally provided room for issues of class inequality to enter into the formulation of social problems by coding them as "poverty." However, in the context of the conceptual struggle with feminist activists (and also the growing feminist influence *within* the profession) the issue of class was effectively shunted aside.

As described by Walker (1990a; 1990b), ultimately, a way to move the issue forward was found. The conceptual coordination took place by construing the violence as a form of assault under the existing provisions of the *Criminal Code*. Then the major impetus was to have wife abuse taken seriously by the police and the criminal justice system. A violent attack by a husband against his wife within the home should be dealt with as severely as an attack by a stranger in a public place. Police forces developed protocols which included mandatory arrest when the investigat-

ing officer had probable cause to believe that an assault had been committed. Previously, the victim (typically the only witness) had to press charges, frequently without the support of authorities (and sometimes in the face of their active discouragement).

Battered women became victims of assault, with rights under the law. To the extent that legal remedies were enacted, all of the underlying assumptions and practices of criminal law came into play. Given the highly developed feminist critique of law, this dovetailing of feminist concerns with those of "law-and-order" advocates is ironic. The feminist analysis of men's violence against women as a pervasive feature of everyday/everynight life in patriarchal society led to a call for the fundamental reshaping of political and economic institutions. By contrast, criminalizing wife abuse entailed identifying and dealing with particular offenses specified under the assault provisions of the *Criminal Code*. In the eyes of the law, individuals were presumed to be free, autonomous and equal; the basic principle of individual responsibility came to the fore. The task became detecting and reacting to the specific criminal acts of individual men. Certain men were singled out, and required to stand in for all men. That these were disproportionately men who were poor, and often members of racial minorities, should not come as a surprise.

With the changes in police practice, the number of cases of domestic assault coming before the courts increased dramatically. There was considerable political pressure from grassroots women's organizations to "take the problem seriously." In the context of criminal proceedings, this meant "getting tough" with offenders rather than letting them off "with a slap on the wrists." While jail sentences were a possibility for severe beatings and repeat offenders, the normal disposition in most jurisdictions soon became fines, suspended sentences, probation and conditional discharges. Beyond the idea of using sentencing to send out the message that wife assault was a serious offense which would no longer be tolerated, in many particular cases judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and even sometimes advocates for battered women, concluded that little would be accomplished by sending the men to jail for extended periods of time. As well as practical considerations related to costs of incarceration, there was the recognition that removing the man from the labour market would

often increase the suffering of his victim, and add to the public welfare rolls. Moreover, while certainly wanting the violence to cease, some women insisted they still cared about their partners, and did not wish to have them severely punished.

Perpetrators seemed as much in need of treatment as punishment. Over the span of a few years, in many jurisdictions in Canada and the United States, specialized programmes were organized to receive men convicted of wife assault. Typically treatment took the form of group counselling, frequently within existing community-based agencies. A number of competing models were developed, including ones identified as "pro-feminist." Perhaps the most common treatment modality was defined in terms of "anger management." From the beginning, controversy surrounded all aspects of these programmes: their underlying philosophy and design, funding and staffing arrangements, and their effectiveness in reducing or eliminating the violent and abusive behaviour of the men involved.

With the movement from the criminal to the treatment setting, the framing of the problem shifted from the relatively specific legal category of assault, to the spongier notion of "abuse." However the emphasis on "individual responsibility" was carried over in ways that effectively individualized and de-politicized the problem.

A Peacemaking Alternative

The dominant discourse constructs the "wife abuser" as a highly rational and autonomous decision maker, fully responsible and culpable for his actions. Yet typically the individuals actually singled out for punishment and treatment have been relatively powerless. "Getting tough" with these men has not been effective in reducing the level of intimate violence.

Inspiration for alternative ways of taking the problem seriously might be drawn from the developing theory and practice of peacemaking criminology (Pepinsky and Quinney, 1991) and restorative justice (Zehr, 1995). This would focus attention on a "cycle of violence" which the dominant discourse tends to ignore: the cycle of interpersonal and societal violence.

The expression "cycle of violence" is commonly used to point to two distinct patterns: (1) *inter-generational transmission*, where-

by children who experience or witness family violence learn that violence is an expected part of intimate relationships, and are supposedly more likely as adults to themselves behave violently, or to accept being victimized by others; (2) *recurrent phasing of violent episodes*, whereby tension builds in a relationship that eventually explodes in a violent outburst, followed by a period of contrition and forgiveness, and then a so-called "honeymoon" stage of relative stability and peace. This latter model is elaborated by the argument that over time, the duration of the peaceful interludes tends to diminish, and the frequency and intensity of the violence escalates.

While both these glosses are plausible, they provide for remedies that focus primarily on resocializing individuals. *In part*, might intergenerational patterns of abuse be explained in terms of the intergenerational transmission of poverty? *In part*, might the recurrent phasing of violent episodes reflect continuing alienation and economic deprivation?

Taking the "third cycle" of interpersonal and societal violence into account leads to the conclusion that fixing individuals will never be sufficient. *Societal violence* is the chronic, non-dramatic violation that takes place everyday as a result of social injustice (Gil, 1996). Growing up in poverty, children are denied opportunities to nurture their talents and build their confidence and self-respect. Adults cannot secure employment that is meaningful and rewarding, and are rendered incapable of participating in civil and political society. When unable to act purposively and positively, individuals experience frustration, anger, disappointment and shame. All too often—particularly in the case of men—these sentiments are expressed violently.

In this light, admonishing certain individual men to take responsibility, and tutoring them in techniques of effective communication and anger management, can never be an adequate solution. Both personal and social transformation are needed. Familiar notions of causality, intentionality, rationality, emotionality and responsibility must be altered in order to work out the implications *for practice* of the insight of Breines and Gordon:

. . . wife beating may be expressive in the individual case but instrumental in the collective . . . while the individual attacks may appear

irrational, taken together, they are an important ingredient in the continued subordination of women; even to women not directly victimized, these attacks teach lessons. (1983, p. 515)

Nils Christie suggests that "Much deviance is expressive, a clumsy attempt to say something." He goes on to counsel: "Let the crime then become a starting point for a real dialogue, and not an equally clumsy answer in the form of a spoonful of pain" (Christie, 1981, p. 11). Men who have behaved violently need to be challenged and supported so that they can effectively and non-violently explore what it is they have been trying to say. A peace-making response must involve creating social spaces outside the relations of ruling in which this dialogue can safely.

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