

Theories used to explain male violence against women partners and ex-partners

Theories are important, not only because they offer different explanations for the phenomenon of domestic abuse, but because each approach has clear implications for responses and interventions by practitioners and policy-makers. If there is no common understanding of a problem, responses will not be consistent, and are likely to conflict. This can undermine quality of service provision, safety and initiatives for social change. Although it is important to recognise and challenge beliefs which are little more than myth or prejudice, we should acknowledge that several of the following theoretical approaches are supported by some legitimate evidence. The National Training Strategy is rooted in acceptance of the broad explanatory power of feminist theories. This rightly shapes and informs our training. But the trend in the literature is toward approaches which seek to integrate valid insights from various perspectives, recognising the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of domestic abuse. Our challenge is to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, and likely outcomes of theories. The criteria for evaluation will reflect our desire for equality, empowerment, justice, dignity and wellbeing.

INDIVIDUALIST APPROACHES

Problem is located within the person and person is site of change. Understood in terms of individual choices, characteristics, interests, biology, genetics, pathologies.

- **Contemporary socio-biology and neo-Darwinism** – evolution of male aggression/violence to maintain female fidelity and secure reproductive control. Abuse is seen as a 'mate retention tactic'. There is little empirical support for these controversial ideas, which provide no useful suggestions for action. Attempts to predict violence using biological variables require a host of non-biological factors to be added. Treatment (pharmacological and medical) is unlikely to be effective in isolation. Some researchers are now attempting to devise a 'batterer typology' based on physiological arousal.
- **Battered women's syndrome/learned helplessness** L Walker (1983). Although developed as a feminist explanation to help women understand the dynamics and impact of DA, this theory is now widely seen as reductionist and open to misuse. In the simplest form it does not account for many rational social, economic and cultural choices which may lead to decision to remain in relationship – fear of retaliation, stalking, escalated violence, need for financial support, concern for wellbeing of children, desire to stay in own home, lack of social, family, community support networks, various aspects of risk assessment and management of survival. However, Walker's work was pioneering feminist research on the psychological effects of victimisation, and the coercive techniques used by perpetrators to subjugate women. Judith Herman has developed a more sophisticated and contextualised theory of trauma and its long term effects, within a political framework. Following recognition of the Stockholm Syndrome, it is clear the attachment to or identification with perpetrator is an appropriate survival strategy: hostages are dependant on captors for basic needs which can be controlled by abusers. There are no valid typologies of 'women likely to be abused', and no correlation between background/ circumstances/personality and the likelihood of experiencing DA

(Herman 1998, Horley 2000). The main risk factor for being subjected to DA is being a woman.

- **'Women-blaming' explanations** These are common currency in public domain, and collude with the perpetrator's claims of provocation and denial of responsibility. They usually rely on assumption of gendered roles and expectations of appropriate or 'unacceptable' female behaviour in performance of domestic or sexual duties. The supposition is that there are times when women 'deserve' to be chastised, even if beatings and other forms of abuse might be considered excessive or 'uncivilised' – and this in turn indicates the resilience of cultural attitudes based on gender inequality and male entitlement in domestic and social arrangements. Tendency to blame the victim of DA has strongly influenced direction of psychological enquiry, leading researchers to seek explanation for perpetrator's abuse in the character of the victim. 'The search for characteristics of women that contribute to their own victimisation is futile...Men's violence is men's behaviour. As such, it is not surprising that the more fruitful efforts to explain this behaviour have focused on male characteristics. What is surprising is the enormous effort to explain male behaviour by examining characteristics of women.' (Hotaling and Sugarman, 1986)
'In order to escape responsibility for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are [his] first line of defence. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens. To this end, he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalisation. After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself...the more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail' (Herman 1998 p8)
- **Male pathologies** – DV as 'deviant' behaviour of psychologically disturbed men. Researchers and practitioners who adopt this perspective often focus on childhood and other experiences/events which shape men to 'become abusers'. Research seeks to compare them with 'normal' control group (NVM). The claim is made that the disturbed/violent men suffer more distress, personality disorders, anger/hostility, alcohol problems than 'normal'. Many lack resources or feel powerless, and they are more likely to have violence in family of origin (Holtzworth-Munroe et al 1997). Adult attachment style – 'excessive interpersonal dependence among abusive men is a consequence of insecure attachment to the primary caregiver in childhood' (Dutton 2005). The premise is that violent patterns of behaviour are long standing and firmly entrenched, and treatment must be intensive and individualised. But a comparative study of court mandated and NVM did not find any difference (Buttall and Jones 2001). Trauma risk from childhood experience of abuse or witnessing domestic abuse? Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is associated with perpetration of violence (Dutton 2000) But why is it only men who respond as adults with 'the extreme detachment necessary to engage in severe violence' (Simonetti et al 2000)? Doesn't explain gender differences, or the scale of domestic abuse. Most men with mental health problems are not abusive, and most abusers are not diagnosable as mentally ill. Why only attack family, not employers or strangers – people suffering from mental health disorders do not limit violent to intimate partners.

- **Typologies of abusive men** Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) – 3 dimensions are used as basis of their typology of violent behaviour:
 - a) severity/frequency; b) domain of violence (family and extra-);
 - c) psychopathology or personality disorders. They generated 3 subgroups of perpetrators: 1. FO (family only) least severe 2. BD (borderline dysphoric) – moderate to severe abuse, maybe some extra-familial violence, and 'psychological distress' Borderline Personality characteristics and likely substance abuse. 3. GVA (generally violent-antisocial) moderate to severe violence, extra-familial violence and criminal behaviour (some GVAs may be psychopaths). Seeks to identify risk factors on basis of typology with correlates: historical (father's DA, experience of child abuse, violent peers) proximal (impulsivity, social skills, attachment/dependency problems)
- **Arguments against individual/psychological perspectives** - they can too easily reinforce sense of entitlement, self-righteousness and narcissism, so often associated with men who batter women (Gondolf 2002). Gondolf's large scale longitudinal and multi-site research tried to verify previous studies which suggested psychopathology and personality disorders among perpetrators. His findings were that the most notable trend was narcissistic or antisocial personalities. These are consistent with 'normal' sense of entitlement, dominance and self-centredness. He found little evidence for a prevailing 'abusive personality' or for much PTSD. The continuum of narcissistic and avoidant tendencies cut across all groupings in sample (Gondolf and White 2000). But there is a small group of men with severe personality or psychopathic tendencies – they may need additional help and close monitoring. Otherwise, prevailing gender-based cognitive behaviour groups therapy (CBGT) may be appropriate for most referred men. *This is the basic model used by DVPP, Partners for CHANGE, SACRO in Scotland*
- **Anger management and 'loss of control' issues leading to 'explosions' of violence.** Men are conventionally assumed to have an 'innate' violence which will surface when they are in situations leading to anger or frustration. But the human emotion of anger is widespread, sometimes just and positive, and does not always or necessarily issue in attacks/assaults on others, especially intimate partners. Most perpetrators of DA are careful to keep the violence private. The nature, timing and evidence of such violence strongly suggests intentionality and control (eg careful not to mark face, getting women up from sleep to abuse them, waiting till they get home from a social function). Why no 'explosions' in other aspects of their lives, against others who cause frustration or anger? So the 'loss of control' theory is contradicted by the behaviour of most abusive men. Research indicates that they often become more controlled and calm as the violence intensifies in severity and frequency. Evaluations of perpetrator programmes offer some evidence that 'loss of control' at the point of committing physical violence may simply be one aspect of the larger controlling and purposeful dynamic which contextualises particular events
- **Disinhibition caused by alcohol or substance use.** Here also the underlying premise is that men are 'naturally' violent and this is unleashed by use of substances. Alcohol is a factor in many domestic assaults. A quarter of all facial injuries to women happen during alcohol related incidents (ESRC 2002), and many women are severely abused by perpetrators who use alcohol and drugs frequently. But the majority of perpetrators are not alcoholics and most heavy or

binge drinkers are not abusers (BMA 1998). 76% of physically abusive episodes occur in the absence of alcohol (Kantor and Straus 1987). It is a socially acceptable reason for 'loss of control'. (Horley 2002)

- **Cycle of Violence (Generational)** This set of ideas is contentious, with arguments both for and against in the literature (Kelly 1999; Peled, Jaffe and Edleston 1995) but widespread in popular culture, reporting and belief: based either on biological (that it is genetically inherited) or, more usually, social learning theories. From the SL perspective, children observe the consequences of behaviour, and learn which ones achieve desired results without incurring negative sanctions. When these are modelled at home and reinforced in media, these patterns become entrenched and will be replicated. Empirical support for this view comes from evaluation of CBT perpetrator programmes, and from research which seems to find high rates of DA perpetration among men who were exposed to violence in childhood. The research findings cannot be disregarded, but nor should they be taken as deterministic, so that both men and women become resigned to use of violence and victimisation as somehow inevitable, unchangeable, continuous. The cycle excludes the rest of us who are 'normal' and non-violent, and therefore is an attractive us/them explanation. Many studies show that majority of abusers come from non-violent backgrounds. Many who have experienced DA as children resolve never to use it. Yet the notion prevails as anecdotal or 'common sense' explanation. In isolation from other theories, this does not explain why the intergenerational transmission of abusive behaviour is not universal. 'Every cycle model attempts to reduce complex social realities to simplistic and individualistic explanations' (Kelly 1999)
- **Cycle of Violence (ebb and flow of episodes)** – This model has developed to answer the 'how' rather than fundamental 'why' questions about domestic abuse, although they are clearly connected. In other countries (USA, Australia etc), though less commonly in UK, this has become a central descriptive and explanatory metaphor used by DV industry as an educational and policy tool. It has changed and developed over the years. Violence is represented as always imminent but moving through phases of quiescence followed by violent outbursts, and then repentant episodes. The originator of this metaphor in relation to domestic violence was Lenore Walker (1978) who used it in her chapter 'treatment alternatives for battered women'. While her intention was therapeutic and to resource women with experience of DA, her 3-phase description (tension building>explosion/acute incident> calm and loving respite) concludes there are times in the cycle when '[the woman] becomes an accomplice to her own battering'. Adaptations of the model have come from 'family violence' and feminist perspectives, but all reflect systemic ways of conceptualising domestic abuse (and social problems more generally) – and these are subject to increasing challenge within social science theory. The cycle is often used to help women interpret danger signs and to take predictive or preventive action. It has also been presented in perpetrator programmes as a means for men to understand their behaviour with a view to changing. Problems with the model include the following:
 - It simply does not reflect the reality experienced by many women, and generalises far beyond any substantive evidence
 - It seems to implicate the woman in the man's behaviour, and requires her to accept a measure of responsibility for monitoring/avoiding that behaviour

- It is actually a cycle of physical assault, and does not capture the complexity or abusive reality of all phases, including remorse and 'honeymoon'
- Change of behaviour or actions by women would supposedly disrupt the man's 'pattern' of response. But this is not consistent with many women's experiences of constant and increasing violence. The use of cycle in DV discourse tends to establish 'norms' according to which both perpetrators and their partners describe, judge and police their relationship. It can be used to make women responsible for ensuring own behaviour 'minimises' or avoids provoking violent phase; as a tool for men who evade their own responsibility for 'it', and is closely linked with 'family conflict' explanatory models

FAMILIAL/SYSTEMS APPROACHES

The focus is on patterns of interaction between couples and within families. Typical terminology refers to 'abusive couples', 'family violence', dysfunctional relationships. The site of change is couples and/or families, because both partners play a role in 'family violence', but remains primarily individual rather than social.

- **Family/Systems Conflict and 'Family Violence' Research.** This approach sees the family as dynamic organisation made up of interdependent components. Behaviour of one member (eg violent man) is affected by responses and feedback of other members. Researchers look at communication, relationship and problem solving skills of couples, and examines variables in comparing 'violent couples' with 'non-violent couples'. Control is regarded as an important but non-gendered variable. Violence is seen as used to correct behaviour or dynamics to enable functioning of family according to appropriate roles/behaviours; or it is a sign of dysfunctionality. Research can suggest symmetry of violence and aggression, that women are equally likely to initiate, and with equivalent motivations. Over 100 empirical studies suggest equivalence M/F DV. This leads to widespread confusion among the general public and policy makers (Kimmel 2002). Crucially, such studies assume accurate and unbiased self-reporting. The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) originated and widely used by Straus and others in quantitative research, tallies acts of force/violence without any context or consideration of impact. It also excludes any record or measurement of sexual violence. It may be useful for eliciting the extent of commonplace social acceptance of violence as a means of communication (in families but also in other aspects of interpersonal relationships). But it frames issues within assumptions of 'conflict' or disagreement, not power and control, and thus fails to identify the underlying gendered dynamics. If family violence theories are correct, the focus of intervention should shift to encouraging women not to provoke or respond, and towards couple/family therapy (Also an increasingly common criminal justice approach – routine arrests of women in some US states on the basis of a violent incident without regard to abusive patterns of behaviour).
- **This raises a fundamental theoretical question: how is domestic violence conceptualised and measured/analysed? This is both political and methodological**
(Straus v Dobash and Dobash)

The systems/family violence approach fails to address gendered realities and avoids any critique of underlying structures of male privilege. A methodologically sound contextual assessment should be based on harm, fear, injury, intimidation, coercion – the '**Constellation of abuse**', not simple listing of acts or discrete events. The CTS and family systems research fails to articulate the complexity and intentionality of DA.

Expressive and Intentional Violence (Kimmel 2002). He argues that CTS measures 'expressive' violence of anger, frustration, conflict, but that it cannot capture 'intentional' or instrumental violence, which is one tactic utilised as part of a fear-based system of domination, rather than an outcome.

- **Dobash and Dobash (2004) research findings on the 'puzzle' of symmetry.** They studied 95 couples (from Scottish court mandated programme) in which men and women reported separately on violence in their relationship : Women's use of violence differs in nature, frequency, intention, intensity, injury and emotional impact. Women did not use intimidating and coercive forms of controlling behaviour. Men reported women's violence as 'inconsequential' which did not affect their wellbeing and safety; they rarely sought protection. Women tend to over-report their own violence, and men underestimate or define away their own (especially anything non-physical). Men and women agree about the nature and impact of women's violence, but disagree about the nature and severity of men's violence.
- **Miller and Meloy (VAW 12, 2006)** Recently released research findings on women's use of force, initiated because mandatory arrest policies in the US have given rise to alarming increases in the arrests of women for DV offences.(either with man or alone). They argue that this gender-neutral approach fails to contextualise incident; fails to distinguish between pattern and incident; fails to protect female victims of abuse. A single act of violence committed by a woman can eclipse a history of abuse and victimisation by male partner. Such behaviour evokes reactions from CJ authorities because it contradicts gender role assumptions of 'victimhood' and submissiveness. M&M observed 95 women on court-mandated Female Offender Programmes. Only 5 used behaviours which could be called 'aggressive violence', while 90 used behaviours not 'battering' or aimed at establishing power and control over their partners. Men did not adapt or constrain behaviour as result of women's violence. The behaviours which led to arrest were mostly either 'frustration response' or self-defence. Most of the latter were trying to get away from a partner during a violent incident or were trying to leave to avoid further violence, especially where they perceived their children to be in danger. M and M conclude that an over-reliance on the criminal justice system to protect women from DA fails to address the gendered nature of the violence: 'This failure can be attributed to the movement away from a critique of the underlying social, legal and political structures that underpin male privilege and use of violence, towards a more individual focus on the pathologies of offenders and victims' (108)

STRUCTURALIST THEORIES

These locate the social problem of domestic abuse in the real or concrete world and its structures – social, political, cultural, ideological – and seek explanations beyond the individual. Site of change is social

- **Violence as intrinsic and endemic part of social structure. DV as ‘stress reaction’ to problems in families/relationships, or circumstances**
Poverty, unemployment, isolation, homelessness, sport, loss of (male) social status and tension have all been referred to as causal factors in domestic abuse. But most incidence and prevalence studies indicate that DA transcends any social, geographical, cultural, socio-economic circumstances. These explanations fail to account for DA perpetrated by the wealthy and privileged, or non-abusive behaviours of many others suffering poverty etc. Cultural and religious beliefs/norms/attitudes may lead to distinctive aspects in the experience and excusing of abuse, and it is not helpful to gloss over as if every woman’s experience, or every man’s context, is identical. Social factors require further study and elucidation to enable fullest understanding and appropriate responses for women in different situations, and subject to additional forms of discrimination.

Seems also to suggest ‘brute’ natural male violence/aggression over which veneer of civilisation cast by wealth and advantage. (Although patterns may vary, and, as noted, false homogenisation of issue is not helpful). Allows abusers to avoid responsibility, or even to ‘justify’ (on religious/cultural grounds). Completely fails to explain gendered realities of DA. Why are poor and unemployed women not major perpetrators of DA, if these are the main ‘causes’?

- **Feminist theoretical approaches: DA exists as part of patriarchal social structures, and is an intentional pattern of behaviour utilised to establish and maintain power and control over a female partner or ex-partner. The appropriate response to challenge and end DA must be major social, communal and cultural change. Within that explanatory framework, there are also feminist perspectives on individual, psychological and therapeutic responses to meet the needs of women, children and young people with experience of DA**
- **Recognition and creating language/discourse of DV as a serious social problem (not just a private matter, or ‘normal’) is a major achievement of the women’s movement and of feminist research/activism. The focus is on social conditions which support gender inequality and male privilege, rather than attempt to identify characteristics and types of a small deviant group of men**

(Bograd 1988) There are 4 common elements in the development of feminist perspectives:

1. Explanatory utility of concepts of gender and power
2. The family is understood and analysed as a historically constructed and situated social institution (no one pattern of kinship, or social arrangement for partnership and child-rearing is ‘natural’ or morally superior)
3. They recognise the crucial importance of understanding and validating women’s experiences.
4. They promote and depend upon the scholarship of women (and there has been historical debate about the validity and acceptability of feminist-supporting male scholars in this field)

- Feminist interventions for change have broad range of targets and concerns, including political, legislative and cultural change to support equality and economic justice for women, as well as provision of services. Principles of validation, control and empowerment informs work with women who have experience of DA

Some aspects of the increasingly complex, sophisticated and fragmented feminist literature and debate around DV/DA/VAW

- male power is located not only or primarily in physical power and aggression, but in the major institutions, structures and ideologies of capitalism (but what about socialism and pre-modern societies?). Violence is socially produced and often legitimated culturally. It is not a 'natural' expression of biological drives or innate male characteristics. It is constructed and learned (and rewarded) behaviour

- developments of analysis to grapple with intersections ; to broaden and incorporate race, class, sexual orientation and colonisation to deal with inadequacies of original simplistic arguments which were overly generalising from unacknowledged standpoints/contexts. Fuller understanding of all dimensions in the socio-political context

- how men benefit or are rewarded, at various levels of human and social interaction, for coercive controlling behaviour

- includes work exploring social construction of 'masculinity' and its relation to violence against women and core realities of gender inequality

- methodological stress on contextuality in study of DA

Empirical support for feminist standpoint includes qualitative research into women's experiences to elucidate the abuse of power and for advocacy; cross-cultural, inter-disciplinary and prevalence research

- **Social Ecology model of social change**

Widely utilised in research and policy around various expressions/understandings of interpersonal, institutional, cultural and structural violence in human society. Has been adapted by many working in the field of DA (including, in Scotland, CHANGE Ltd)

Interaction of factors at each level of the social ecology – individual, family/relationship, community, society/culture – contribute to perpetuation of DA. These reinforce and efforts for change must be directed at all levels

Men's Violence: incident 'trigger factors' are consistent globally:

- woman disobeying or arguing
- questioning him about money or girlfriends
- not having food ready on time or in right way
- 'failures' as mother or housekeeper
- woman refusing to have sex
- man being accused of infidelity *(WHO Report on Violence and Health 2002)*

POSTSTRUCTURALIST THEORIES

A key feature is the centrality of narrative or text – about individual and about society. Words and language do not *reflect* but are instrumental in *constructing* reality.

- DV as 'social problem' requires language, truths and knowledge – DISCOURSES, which are constantly evolving, contested and competing
- Shifts in discursive shaping of issue – changing language around the issue: battered wives, domestic violence, abuse, intimate partners, victims/survivors/WCYPEDA...
- Both men and women create/produce stories about themselves – stories and scripts we live by. Good and bad stories
- Socio-political context of discourses is important – eg women's movement, medical and legal developments, devolution, international human rights discourse – International Women's Year, Beijing and UN
- Analysis of discourse (in media as well as academic and practitioners) indicates key shifts in privilege and power of competing discourses
- These affect responses and interventions
- Government, partnership, multi-agency working
- Professionalisation and DV 'industry' – a battleground?
- From radical edge to mainstream? Increasing acceptance of gender and social explanations, but the discourse is never static, and theoretical alignments are constantly shifting. What criteria do we use to assess and either reject or take on board new perspectives, narratives or theories?
- **Definitions of domestic violence/abuse**
These define not only the issue/problem, but also the interested parties and stakes in the discourse. They are vital tools for policy and practice and are inherently political. A constant process of changing and refining definitions reflects theoretical stance adopted, and desired outcomes

REFERENCES AND HELPFUL READING

- Bograd M & Yllo K (eds) *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse* (1988)
- Bograd M "Strengthening Domestic Violence Theories: Intersections of Race, Class, Sexual Orientation and Gender" *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 23/3 (1999)
- Buttall & Jones "Interpersonal Dependency among Court-Ordered Domestic Violence Offenders: A Descriptive Analysis" *Journal of Family Violence* 16 (2001)
- Cavanagh, Dobash, Dobash & Lewis "Remedial Work: Men's Strategic Responses to their Violence against Intimate Female Partners" *Sociology* 35 (2001)
- C,D,D&L *Changing Violent Men* (2000)
- Dobash & Dobash *Women, Violence and Social Change* (1992)
- Rethinking Violence Against Women* (1998)
- *"Women's Violence to Men in Intimate Relationships: Working on a Puzzle" *British Journal of Criminology* 44 (2004)
- Gondolf EW *Batterer Intervention Systems: Issues, Outcomes and Recommendations* (2002)
- Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart "Typologies of Male Batterers: 3 subtypes and differences among them" *Psychology Bulletin* (1994)
- Holtzworth-Munroe et al "Testing the H-M & Stuart Batterer Typology" *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (2000)
- Kimmel, M *"'Gender Symmetry' in Domestic Violence: A Substantive and Methodological Research Review" *Violence Against Women* 8/11 (2002)
- Hague G & Malos E *Domestic Violence: Action for Change* (3rd ed 2005)
- Herman, J *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992)

Unfinished list...!

