

Domestic Violence at the Crossroads: Violence Against Poor Women and Women of Color

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Abstract

All too often research on domestic violence has been presented as a “one size fits all” approach. This is inadequate to the experiences and needs of diverse groups of women who are abused. Instead, this article looks at the recent research using a race, class, gender, sexuality *intersectional* analysis and structural framework to understand the lived experiences and contexts of domestic violence for marginalized women in the U.S., the relationship of battering in the family to violence against women (and men) by larger systems of socially structured inequality in poor and racialized communities, and the availability of resources to diverse groups of women to fight this oppression. While culture is key in explaining violence against women, it is important to not make “culture” the scapegoat in an analysis of violence against women nor to downplay the strengths of different cultures available to battered women. It is argued that only by understanding the structural systems of social inequality through which different cultures operate that we can work toward safety for all women and children.

Introduction

Mainstream *feminist* theory argues that socially structured and culturally approved gender inequality is causative in understanding domestic violence.¹ This approach was far superior to the earlier individual *psychological* arguments that pathologized battered women’s experiences and blamed them for their own abuse. Too, it was an advance over the *family systems* approach which ultimately pathologized either the individual (man or woman) or both partners.

But the intersectional or multicultural domestic violence approach challenges gender inequality as *the* primary factor explaining domestic violence: gender inequality is neither the most important nor the only factor that is needed to understand domestic violence in the lives of marginalized women. Gender inequality is only part of their marginalized and oppressed status. In fact, argues Bograd (1999), gender inequality is *modified* by its intersection with other systems of power and inequality that affect the lives of battered women. And one’s experience as a battered woman is *realized* only in relation to other social locations or intersectionalities in society of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and immigrant and disability status. As Bograd states: “Intersectionalities color the meaning and nature of domestic violence, how it is experienced by self and responded to by others; how personal and social consequences are reproduced, and how and whether escape and safety can be obtained” (276).²

In the multicultural domestic violence literature, two sometimes conflicting objectives emerge: giving voice to battered women from diverse social locations and cultural backgrounds while still focusing on the structural inequalities (i.e., race, gender, class) that constrain and shape the lives of battered women, albeit in different ways. The first has been described as the “race/class/gender” perspective, whose focus is on multiple, interlocking oppressions of individuals and difference; the second has been described as the “structural” perspective requiring analysis and criticism of existing systems of power, privilege and access to resources (see Andersen and Collins, 2001; Mann and Grimes, 2001). My work honors both of these perspectives and demands both “difference” (including culture) and “structural inequality”—as well as culture—to understand the diverse experiences of battered women typically on the margins of U.S. society.

**How a Multicultural or Intersectional Analysis Can Help to Understand
Marginalized Women’s Experiences of Domestic Violence Without Further**

Marginalized Women's Experiences of Domestic Violence Without Partner: Disempowering Them

For years we have heard that domestic violence cuts across all classes, races, and ethnic groups. To be sure there is truth in this statement. Yet multicultural scholars challenge this uncritical view by arguing that poor women of color are the “most likely to be in both dangerous intimate relationships and dangerous social positions” (Richie, 2000, 1136). Beth Richie argues that the anti-domestic violence movement’s avoidance of a race and class analysis of violence against women “seriously compromises the transgressive and transformative potential of the antiviolence movement’s potential [to] radically critique various forms of social domination” (1135). The failure to address the multiple oppressions of poor women of color jeopardizes the validity and legitimacy of the anti-domestic violence movement.

One dilemma is the problem of how to report race and class differences in domestic violence prevalence rates. This literature indicates that there is tremendous diversity among women regarding the prevalence, nature, and impact of domestic violence—even within ethnic, racial, religious, socio-economic groups and sexual orientations (Hampton et al., 1998; West, 2004). Several studies indicate that Black women are severely abused (West, 2004) and murdered at significantly higher rates (Hampton et al., 1998; Websdale, 1997; West, 2004) than their representation in the population.

By itself, this information may serve little purpose but to reinforce negative stereotypes about African Americans. One solution to this problem of representation is to *contextualize* these findings within a *structural* framework—one that looks at socially organized systems of social inequality. An emerging body of work offers support, in large part, for an economic or structural explanation for differential prevalence rates. Many studies on intimate partner violence which control for socioeconomic factors find that racial/ethnic differences in domestic violence rates largely disappear (Hampton et al., 1998; Rennison and Planty, 2003). This finding suggests that at least one major underlying reason for the greater level of domestic violence among African Americans is not attributable to racial/cultural factors but to the high and extreme levels of poverty in Black communities. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that not only is abuse more likely to be found among impoverished African Americans, but they are also more likely to be young, unemployed urban residents (Hampton et al., 1998; C. West, 2002). Thus age, employment status, residence, poverty, social embeddedness, and isolation combine to explain higher rates of abuse within Black communities—not race or culture per se.

This being said, it is also important to understand the profound racism that exists in U.S. society, including the effects of racially segregated communities. Thus, for example, the degree of poverty is more intense in the Black community. Whereas 75 percent of poor Blacks live in communities with other poor Blacks—and all its attendant disadvantages, only 25 percent of poor whites live in poor white communities. Instead, poor whites are more likely to live in communities with working class and middle class white residents, which provides an immeasurable degree of resources available to that community (e.g., see Rusk, 1995). So comparing poverty in poor Black and white neighborhoods is simply not “comparable.” This must be taken into account in working toward lowering levels of domestic violence in Black and white communities.

How a Multicultural/Intersectional Analysis Challenges Stereotypes of Marginalized Communities and Their Cultures

All too often, white America is quick to allocate blame to non-white cultures (especially Black and immigrant) for domestic violence. According to Shamita Das Dasgupta (1998), “American mainstream society still likes to believe that woman abuse is limited to minority ethnic communities, lower socio-economic stratification, and individuals with dark skin colors” (212-213). This leads to stereotyping of battered women from “other” cultures. But it also fails to look at the strengths of other cultures and how they provide protective factors for battered women. Moreover, this approach fails to understand the impact of U.S. imperialism and the oppression of the state both within and outside the U.S. and their relationship to domestic violence in different communities. As Almeida and Lockard (2004) suggest

domestic violence in different communities. As Ahnfeldt and Eschard (2007) suggest, the impact of this public violence of imperialism, classism, and racism on battering in the private sphere of the home and intimate relationships “has, unfortunately, received little research.” In fact, a research agenda and analysis to understand state violence against people of color and its implication on violence against women of color is suggested in a joint statement (2004) by Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (a transnational organization of feminists of color who organize around the intersections of interpersonal and state violence) and Critical Resistance (which organizes against the prison industrial complex). They came together in order to develop a document that could help bring together the anti-prison and anti-violence movements in closer collaboration.

With regard to stereotyping, Uma Narayan (1997) describes how in the U.S., when women in India or Pakistan die “by fire” in dowry deaths (a man or his family kills the woman because they are dissatisfied with her dowry to the paternal family line with whom she often lives), many people in the United States call this barbaric, horrendous, and due to the “backwardness” of the South Asian culture. However, when women in the U.S. are killed by guns (at the same rate as dowry deaths in India), this is rarely, if ever, said to be due to the culture; rather it is usually blamed on the individual man’s unstable personality at best and patriarchy at worst. But the American culture is not said to be “backward” or to blame for her death.

With regard to a culture’s protective factors, for example, Kantor et al. (1994) has found that Mexican men born in Mexico but living in the U.S. are *less* likely to be violent against their wives than U.S.-born Mexican American men; and the longer the men are in the U.S., the more violent they are toward their wives. Thus, contrary to the myth that Latino/a culture is more patriarchal—and thus, supposedly more dangerous, for its women—the intact nature of the Mexican experience, not diluted as much by U.S. influence, seems to act as a protective factor against battering. Likewise, Murray (1998) reports that in some Cheyenne tribes, where women have legal rights to property and children, the practice of polygamy may have protected women from abuse. Thus, if the husband was abusing one wife, the other wives would not sleep with him and provide sexual services until he stopped abusing her.

One last example I would like to share is the particular belief in U.S. society for battered women to look to “outside” help for battered women from marginalized communities: if they only left their batterer, they would be safe. The criticism to this approach is in reference to issues of racism, homophobia, and xenophobia (fear of foreigners). First, most women *do* leave their batterers; it takes on average 7 attempts before she is ultimately able to be free from him; and that the most violent and dangerous time for a woman in a battering relationship is just before or at the point of leaving (e.g., see Browne, 2003). Leaving does not necessarily mean safety.

One of the major issues for battered women from marginalized communities is that outside help is feared because there is so much individual and institutional discrimination against her from “outsiders”—police, courts, doctors, domestic violence agencies, etc.—in mainstream communities. So while it may be true that she will face violence in her family or community, it is just as true that if she goes outside her community, she will face another set of hostilities. For example, women who come from other countries who have dark skin may have never experienced racism in their home countries. But in the U.S., where racism is common and profound, a battered woman of color may be treated badly (e.g., discriminated against or violated) by the system having nothing to do with her personal situation but because she is perceived in a racist framework. This is seen most profoundly in immigrant and non-English speaking communities, but is also prevalent wherever poor, marginalized populations are involved (Dasgupta, 1998; DeKeseredy, et al., 2003; Narayan, 1997; and Websdale, 2004).

Typically, Black and Latina women often do not want to call the police because they want the battering to stop, not to have their partners arrested and incarcerated. The discrimination in the criminal justice system in the U.S. is deep and profound: as many as one-third of all young African American men are in prison, jail, on probation or parole in the U.S. (Sokoloff, 2003). In some cities, like Baltimore and Washington D.C., it is over half! Black women who are battered often do not feel the police and the criminal justice system will solve their problems; rather they may just intensify them. In short, the police do not “solve” the situation or to “call the police” may

them. In short, the advice to either “leave” the situation or to “call the police” may actually harm rather than help certain groups of battered women.

Culturally Competent and Community Based Alternatives

Many new alternatives are being proposed for dealing with domestic violence in marginalized communities, which ultimately will help all women. I would like to end by mentioning just one such alternative: that of the Cultural Context Model (CCM), an approach fostered by Rhea Almeida and her colleagues (1999, 2004). This approach requires abusers to take responsibility for their violence and supports the empowerment of victims and children by providing a wide range of services to the entire family. The CCM rejects the commonly held belief that domestic violence is the product of “other” cultural traditions by identifying domestic violence as a universal pattern of domination and control. At the same time, this therapeutic model acknowledges the powerful impact that social, cultural and structural forces can have on families. It links gender ideology and subordination in individual couples with experiences of racial subordination and colonization in marginalized communities, thereby linking the struggle for gender equality with the struggles for racial and economic justice—without requiring the women to choose between cultural identity or group membership and their safety and autonomy.

Given the racism, classism, sexism and homophobia inherent in (i.e., structured into) the criminal justice system, the CCM offers battered women an alternative approach. A unique aspect of the program includes men’s and women’s “culture circles” where participants can discuss the ways in which structural factors may help shape peoples’ choices with regard to domestic violence. Participants are also assigned a sponsor who provides ongoing support with a focus on accountability for batterers and empowerment for victim-survivors. While this model places full responsibility for violence on abusers, it also recognizes the impact of a number of social forces including both structure and culture upon families. As the authors suggest, “this system of intervention offers a range of new options: the possibility of returning to their now nonviolent partners, the possibility of children rebuilding relationships with their abusive parent, the possibility of having a civil and safe divorce, and lastly, the possibility of maintaining safety through community rather than criminal justice intervention” (Almeida and Lockard, 2003, 25). Several programs in the Latino/a community share similar features to the Cultural Context Model (Garza, 2001).

Finally, it is important to state that even culturally competent services are inadequate alone: they cannot prevent or stop domestic violence. Domestic violence is part of the larger systems of violence (e.g., imperialism, racism, colonialism, patriarchy, etc.) and as such domestic violence must be attacked at its root causes: the socially structured systems of inequality—of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, immigrant status, and the like. We need structural solutions to structural problems, all the while respecting and understanding specific contributions of individual cultures. But most important, we must look to understanding the intersectionality of these structural and cultural institutions as we struggle against domestic violence in all communities.

NOTES

[1](#) Domestic violence is a term that includes physical, sexual, and psychological violence—typically, but not exclusively, by men against women in an intimate relationship.

[2](#) Of course lesbian battering automatically challenges the notion of gender inequality as primary in explaining domestic violence at its very core (see Ristock, 2001, for an understanding of the complexity of all situations of battering, including lesbian battering).

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For more information on this topic, see the extensive bibliography by **Natalie J. Sokoloff, *Multicultural Domestic Violence Bibliography***:
www.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/research/DomesticViolence/. Her book, *Domestic Violence at the Margins: A Reader at the Intersections of Race, Class, Gender & Culture*, will be published by Rutgers University Press in 2005.