The Past and the Future of Violence Against Women

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The Past and the Future of Violence Against Women

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The most important thing we have learned about violence against women over the past 20 years is that violence is gendered and learned and can only be understood in the context of gender inequality. Most violence is male, and although some violence is done by females, it is far from equal and often done for very different reasons. Among other major findings is that children from violent households tend to grow up to be problematic, which means that a major method of curbing juvenile delinquency in 10 years is to stop violence against women today.

Keywords: gender; gender symmetry; masculinities; female violence; bystander intervention

This article reflects 25 years of work in sexual assault and physical violence within intimate relationships. Although the invitation may have been to look at violence broadly, this article looks at the narrower field of interpersonal violence and violence against women. Just as with most research or study, from my point of view, what we have mainly found over the past two decades is that the more we work, the more we study, the deeper we delve, the better our methodologies, the overall outcome is that the more complexities, the more difficulties and the more nuances we reveal. This makes it more difficult every year to reduce the entire field to bumper-sticker slogans like “all men are rapists” or “men and women have equal rates of battering.” Each year, we have more conflicting information, which leads to more disputes on how to interpret the information we do have. Nevertheless, the past two decades have brought us some important findings, some important insights, and newer theoretical orientations. This short article does not pretend to cover all of them or even to introduce all of the most useful ones. It is, rather, a very personal list of what is important in the field of interpersonal violence.

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WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The most important research finding of the past two decades is that violence is gendered and can only be understood in the context of gender inequality. Twenty years ago, we knew that men could be very violent, and early feminist theory emphasized that it was men who were properly the primary object of study. Of course, there have been many, usually those who are driven by the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) research findings, who have insisted that men and women have similar rates of violence. Most often, this conclusion is only reached by equating mild with serious forms of violence. Virtually always those who make such claims reach their conclusions by treating male and female as sex categories, rather than as a gender system that is socially constructed and informed. Although there has been a great deal of political posturing and poor journalism about violent females, including many groups of batterers claiming the mantle of “men’s rights,” there is no question that men are much more violent than women. Men still account for most injury and homicide not only of women but also of male victims.

Accounting for this male difference remains a gap in many explanations of violence. For example, few of the explanations proffered for school violence and mass shootings have attempted to differentiate between boys and girls. If the cause is, as is often claimed, day care, working mothers who don’t care for their children, MTV and rap music, Hollywood movies and TV that glorify sex and violence, easy gun availability, lowered moral standards, and sexual promiscuity or drug use, then why are school shootings carried out by boys? Violent girls and women certainly exist, but violence overall is not gender neutral.

Much of what has been learned recently in this area is that gender plays a complex role in violence. This is not only true of male interpersonal violence against females but male interpersonal violence against males and female interpersonal violence against females. The newer fields of study of masculinities and femininities have begun to shed a great deal of light on the shifting and changing socially constructed gender social roles with which we all live (see, e.g., Miller & White, 2003). There have been massive studies of masculinities in a variety of countries, showing that there is no single masculinity or male or macho role for men, but rather that a variety of social forces come together to create different male social roles in different situations, all with the individual negotiation of the male involved. Although there is no question that the same process occurs for females (no single female role; roles are not biological or determined), the equivalent study of femininities is just beginning (Glass, Koziol-McLain, Campbell, & Block, 2004).
Certainly, the other major finding of the past 20 years is that women are much more likely to be harmed inside an intimate relationship than by a stranger. The issue is much more complex for men, who, probably because they are more likely to frequent “hot spots” of violence at “hot hours” of victimization, remain more likely to be both victims and offenders in violence. Still, for most women and many men, statistically the most dangerous place to be is at home, and the most dangerous people to be around are family and friends.

There are many other things that we have learned in the past 20 years. Another major finding has been that most things are more complicated than we thought in the 1970s. There is an old joke about the scientist who proves that “nothing is so complex that, if looked at in exactly the right way, does not become still more complex.” For example, 20 years ago, virtually all experts and activists taught Lenore Walker’s model of domestic violence escalation. Today, we are beginning to understand that this may not apply in all violent relationships. In many different ways, battering victims and offenders have refused to follow our theories and have insisted on acting as they wished.

WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO BE LEARNED NEXT?

As suggested above, the study of femininities is in its early stages. There are a number of important things to be learned about how young women are exposed to violence, why they may engage in violence or not, and even what influence they may have on young men. For example, I have spent a great deal of time working under Walter DeKeseredy’s leadership on a male peer support theory on how men influence and support each other in their use of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse of women (see, e.g., Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997; Schwartz, DeKeseredy, Tait, & Alvi, 2001). First, there is a great deal more to be learned about these factors, including a major test of the entire model. However, one thing that might be built in is female peer support, not only for how females support each other in the use of violence but also for ways in which females may support male use of violence against other women or against men.

It isn’t, of course, the influence of females on males only that needs to be studied. One of the problems of the past two decades has been the political undertone of much of the analyses. One group of analysts has seized on poorly analyzed and often simplistic data to argue that women are violent and at least as violent as men. For example, studies based on the CTS have usually shown that the number of blows struck by women and men are roughly equal,
but few have looked further at context, meaning, and motivation, let alone consequence, such as injury. For this reason, other scholars have carefully avoided looking at the violence of women. If minimal or poorly conceived data could be the basis behind newspaper headlines and fathers’ rights groups’ political lobbying, the feeling often went that it was best to avoid deeper study of violent women. Poor data have led to minimizing men’s severe violence and to a reduction of services to women. Yet, one consequence of this rather understandable movement away from studying female violence has been that women’s violence is deeply undertheorized (Miller, 2001).

Meanwhile, as a very strong example of how conflicting findings need to be resolved in competent public policy, Dugan, Nagin, and Rosenfeld (2003) studied the substantial reduction of homicide in intimate relationships since 1976. In general, they found that prevention resources that reduced a victim of physical violence’s exposure to abusive partners were highly effective in reducing future homicide. However, some other attempted interventions that were not particularly effective seemed to generate a retaliation effect that actually increased the risk of homicide in similar cases. Thus, they conclude that some forms of intervention are worse than no intervention at all! Yet, they did find that some interventions were highly effective. This is an area that obviously needs a great deal more immediate study.

Another important area for future research is in child maltreatment and abuse. For example, we know as well as anything in this field that children who are abused, or who live in homes marked by extreme violence, are more likely to grow up to be antisocial and violent in a number of ways. For some reason, we are deeply concerned to stop adolescent drug use and worry about a variety of adolescent delinquent acts, but we are unwilling to make the connection that intervening in a violent and terroristic home marked by the battering of adult women can have a role in stopping these acts some years later. Ignoring the negative consequences of child maltreatment is very expensive for society. Bluntly, one of the best methods of reducing street crime may be to take active steps to reduce violence against women 10 years earlier.

One place where the nation has put in a great deal of money and effort is batterer intervention programs. Yet, we still know reasonably little about them and what would really work. We don’t know who is more likely to benefit from such programs and who is not, and we don’t know enough about who is likely to return to harm again—if not a current partner, then a later one. Part of the problem is that much of the money has gone into programs that are too short and unmonitored (e.g., attendance).

I would like to suggest that our interest in bullying has gotten out in front of our knowledge. Although many of us believe that violence begets vio-
ence, and the victims of bullying are the ones who take out their pent-up aggression on others, this has not yet been fully established. It is an area that could use much more research.

A related area, and the final one that I would like to mention, is the extent to which intervention into the behavior of bullies can have an effect on their behaviors. There are several major studies going on today concerning this from a variety of directions. For example, if men are trained to step in and make it clear to other men that misogynist, racist, objectifying humor or behavior is objectionable and unacceptable, what effect will this have? For example, one would be hard put to locate a movie, film, or even a music video that features the torture, dismemberment, or even simple killing of an animal. A general American attitude that animal torture is not a proper subject for entertainment has essentially stopped the visual portrayal of it. Yet, the dismemberment, vivid torture, rape, and fatal wounding of men and women is a standard feature of our entertainment, from pornography to religious movies. Would a campaign that changed our sensibilities toward the visual depiction of sexual assault, or even the murder of men, begin to change our sensibilities toward the acceptability of these events happening in real life?

REFERENCES


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