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Sociological Theories of Intimate Partner Violence

JENNIFER LAWSON

School of Social Welfare, University of California, Berkeley, California, USA

Sociological theories of intimate partner violence seek to explain violent behavior as a function of social structures rather than individual pathology. This review examines the major theories used by sociologists to understand intimate partner violence, categorizing them by their respective views regarding the role of gender in intimate partner violence. Family violence theories (including systems theory, ecological theory, exchange/social control theory, resource theory, and the subculture-of-violence theory) view intimate partner violence as an expression of conflict within the family that can best be understood through examination of social structures contributing to the use of violence. Feminist theory sees intimate partner violence as an expression of gender-based domination of women by men. This review also discusses some integrative theories that seek to bridge the polarized views of the traditional perspectives in relation to gender.

KEYWORDS *Domestic violence, intimate partner violence, sociological theory, feminist theory, family violence*

Even a cursory glance at the news makes apparent the pervasiveness of violence in society. Examples of violence abound, demonstrating the frequency of violence ranging from the micro-level (celebrities arrested for spousal abuse) to the macro-level (genocide in Darfur) and levels between (the shooting at Fort Hood, gang violence). The commonness of violence makes it an area of focus that is examined across social science disciplines. Scholars in anthropology, psychology, political science, economics, and sociology, among others, study violence through their respective disciplinary lenses in an attempt to understand the nature and causes of violent behavior.

Address correspondence to Jennifer Lawson, School of Social Welfare, University of California, 120 Haviland Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA. E-mail: jennlawson@berkeley.edu

The unique perspective of sociology is the treatment of violence as a function of social structures as opposed to individual pathology. According to Levin and Rabrenovic (2007), a few overarching theories are used by sociologists to understand violence, each of which seeks to explain violence as a function of social structures and systems. These broad sociological theories include *strain theory*, which suggests that social structures and relationships produce frustrations that cause some people to react with violence; *social disorganization theory*, which posits that physical factors in the neighborhood environment cause social conditions that create criminal behavior, including violence; and *benefit theory*, which proposes that violence occurs when social costs are low and, therefore, the benefits of violence outweigh the costs (Levin & Rabrenovic, 2007). As these fundamental theories demonstrate, the sociological perspective looks at social, not individual, causes of violence.

As noted, the scope of violence ranges from micro- to macro-levels, all of which are subjects of sociological study. Because of this expansive scope of violence as a unit of analysis, a smaller subunit was chosen as the subject of this review to allow for a somewhat more detailed look into one aspect of a large topic. Specifically, this review looks at the sociological theoretical discourse on intimate partner violence.

Intimate partner violence was first widely recognized as a social problem in the 1970s after a long history of being treated as a private matter that did not warrant research or attention outside the family (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gelles, 1985). Since the shift that brought the problem to the attention of scholars and the general public, the field of sociology has split into two distinct bodies of theories on the issue. Stated broadly, theories on partner violence tend to view intimate partner violence from either a feminist perspective or a general family violence perspective. Feminist theories treat the problem of partner violence as an issue fundamentally related to gender and specifically to the patriarchal domination of men over women. Family violence theories regard partner violence as just one aspect of the larger issue of family violence; intimate partner violence is not seen as qualitatively different from child abuse, elder abuse, or violence between siblings—all are expressions of family conflict that can be conceptualized by using several different theories.

The theoretical divide between feminist and family violence perspectives is so pronounced that even deciding on the nomenclature for discussing the problem is fraught with meaning, as the various terms for describing the problem reflect their underlying theoretical assumptions. The terms *wife abuse*, *wife beating*, and *violence against women* all reflect a theoretical choice to frame the problem in gendered terms that reflect the fundamental assumption that gender is at the center of the problem. Terms such as *spouse abuse*, *marital violence*, *family violence*, and even *domestic violence* reflect the theoretical assumption that the problem is essentially gender-neutral and, therefore, should be studied and discussed in gender-neutral

terms. For this review, the term *intimate partner violence* was selected as the primary term with which to discuss the problem of violence between men and women within marriages or other intimate relationships (when not directly citing the terms used by others). This term was chosen as the best option to maintain objectivity and avoid implicit agreement with any particular theoretical framework; it avoids openly endorsing a feminist perspective, but it also focuses the discussion on the male/female partner relationship as the specific unit of analysis warranting attention apart from the larger concept of family violence.

This review is divided into four major sections. In the first two sections, family violence theories and feminist theory are reviewed and discussed. In the third section, the two major frameworks are compared and contrasted with respect to gender symmetry (the extent to which women are perpetrators of intimate partner violence). The last section includes theories that seek to integrate the polarized perspectives of the feminist and family violence traditions and concludes with a conceptual map that provides a visual overview and synthesis of the sociological perspectives on intimate partner violence.

METHODS

The theories included in this review were located and selected using a variety of search methods. An online search was conducted using the University of California, Berkeley electronic databases. Sociological Abstracts, the core database in the discipline, and the Sociology: SAGE full-text collection were searched using combinations of search terms that included truncated forms of "theory," "sociology," "violence," "domestic," "wife," "abuse," "battering," and "family." These same terms were used in the University of California Melvyl database to locate book titles and other works pertinent to the topic.

From the initial body of results obtained from the online search, the reference lists from these articles were reviewed to determine the most frequently cited works, and a clear body of literature began to emerge. In addition, expert consultation was obtained from Michael Johnson of Pennsylvania State University, a sociologist and theorist in the area of intimate partner violence, who provided guidance on sociological theories and scholars.

Finally, a clear picture of the key theories in the area was shaped by reviewing several existing literature reviews of sociological theories of intimate partner violence. These include overviews by Bersani and Chen (1988), Gelles (1985, 1993), and Gelles and Straus (1979). It is also noted that theories that do not fall strictly within the disciplinary bounds of sociology are excluded, with one exception (Dutton, 2006). As it was not possible to capture the breadth of sociological theories within the brief format of this review, the theories and theorists discussed in this review should not be

regarded as a comprehensive selection but rather as an overview of the core theoretical dialogue of the discipline.

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

Family Violence Perspectives

The family violence perspective has been primarily developed, defined, and advocated by the sociologists Richard Gelles and Murray Straus, two prolific and influential scholars in family violence theory, research, and intervention. As explained in the writings of these and other researchers, the family violence perspective views conflict between family members as universal and inevitable, and violence between any family members (including violence between spouses) is viewed as one method utilized by those members to resolve this predictable conflict (see Allen & Straus, 1979; Gelles & Straus, 1979; Gelles, 1983, 1993; Gelles & Maynard, 1987; Giles-Sims, 1983; Straus, 1973). In contrast to psychological explanations of violence, the family violence perspective asserts that most family violence is not the result of individual pathology but is a “normal part of family life in most societies and in America” (Gelles & Straus, 1979, p. 549). In this perspective, the unit of analysis is the family (rather than the individual or the couple), and partner violence is just one expression of conflict within the larger family structure.

For those utilizing a family violence perspective, the key to understanding intimate partner violence is to understand what makes family members use violence as a means of resolving conflict, and multiple theories are available to this end. Systems theory, exchange theory, ecological theory, subculture-of-violence theory, and resource theory are some of the frameworks used by sociologists to understand intimate partner violence within a family violence paradigm. It should be noted that, in keeping with the family violence perspective, the theories outlined primarily refer to *family* violence, rather than intimate partner violence specifically, as the family is viewed as the primary unit of analysis.

SYSTEMS THEORY

Systems theory, a paradigmatic framework for both sociology and social work, has been applied to intimate partner violence by sociologists including Straus (1973), Giles-Sims (1983), and Gelles and Maynard (1987). Straus was the first to propose the application of systems theory to family violence. In his seminal theory, he espouses the fundamental tenet of the family violence perspective: that violence within a family is the norm, not the exception. Violent conflict is seen as a systemic product that is common to the point of being “almost universal” (p. 105) and not indicative of individual or family pathology. Put succinctly, “The starting point for this theory was the heuristic

assumption that violence between members of a family is a 'systemic product' rather than a chance aberration or a product of inadequate socialization or a warped or psychotic personality" (p. 114). Straus proposes that systems respond to feedback from interactions within the system; in the context of family violence, positive feedback increases or amplifies violence, negative feedback decreases or controls violence.

In her book, *Wife Battering: A Systems Theory Approach* (1983), Giles-Sims concisely summarizes the central tenets of systems theory: "Social systems are complex interrelated networks of mutually causal elements with relatively stable patterns of relationships. Systems theory interprets cause-effect links as elements in a cycle of behavior, which includes feedback responses and behavioral reactions" (p. 18). Like Straus, Giles-Sims also advocates for the use of systems theory in understanding intimate partner violence because the theory accounts for the complex causality of the problem, asserting that single-factor linear causal approaches "cannot capture the complexity of social behavior" (p. 18). She also notes that systems theory is based on the family violence perspective that conflict within the family system is normal and inevitable, and how the family system manages the conflict is the key to understanding why violence is used. According to Giles-Sims, systems theory provides a basis for examining how feedback and response can escalate into violence or maintain nonviolence. In looking at the causes of family violence, systems theory goes beyond explanations that focus solely on individual or structural characteristics to include the fundamental importance of the characteristics of the family system in which individuals exist and interact. Many characteristics of family structure (including socialization, time spent together, and stress level) impact the potential for violence in the system (Giles-Sims, 1983).

ECOLOGICAL THEORY

Donald Dutton (2006) proposes a nested ecological theory, a framework closely related to systems theory, for understanding intimate partner violence. Though Dutton is a social psychologist, not a sociologist, his writing addresses sociological theory at length, and he is cited by numerous other researches in the sociological literature. Unlike those with a strict sociological view, Dutton focuses on the individual as the unit of analysis for addressing intimate partner violence, but he considers the environment and relationships of the individual to be essential to understanding violent behavior in intimate relationships. In explaining the basis of the ecological perspective, he states, "Such theories were developed primarily by developmental psychologists and ethologists and are so-called because more precise variables (e.g., individual development) are viewed as 'nested in' (operating within) broader variables (e.g., cultural norms, subcultures)" (p. 19). Citing a defining framework developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and previously applied to family

conflict by Belsky (1980), Dutton identifies four levels of systemic social context that bear upon individual behavior: The *macrosystem* is composed of “broad cultural values and belief systems” (p. 19); the *exosystem* is composed of the groups and institutions (such as school, work, peers, and church) that connect the family to the larger environment; the *microsystem* is the family unit itself—the immediate context that surrounds the individual; and finally, *ontogenetic* factors refer to an individual’s personal development, and they “define what a particular individual’s unique developmental history brings into this three-level social context” (p. 19). Dutton asserts that factors from all four of these systemic levels come to bear on any given intimate partner violence scenario. The ecological perspective is in line with the systems theory focus on the complex and interrelated networks of systems that influence behavior, including violent behavior.

EXCHANGE/SOCIAL CONTROL THEORY

Social exchange theory is utilized by some sociologists as a basis for understanding why family violence occurs. Stated in its simplest terms, this theory posits that family violence occurs when the rewards of violent behavior outweigh the risks (Gelles, 1983; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Nye, 1979). Or, as Gelles and Straus (1988) succinctly put it, “How can the group we turn to for love and understanding be so cruel and harmful? Because they can” (p. 20). In other words, the rewards of behaving violently are greater than the costs.

Gelles (1983) proposes a linkage between exchange theory and social control theory by noting that “[F]amily violence occurs in the absence of social controls which would bond people to the social order and negatively sanction family members for acts of violence” (p. 157). Three points of the combined exchange/social control theory are applied to examining causes of family violence: (1) family violence will occur when rewards outweigh costs; (2) lack of effective social controls in the family decreases costs and, therefore, makes violence more likely; and (3) family and social structures, including inequality (e.g., in gender, status, economic resources, or physical strength), privacy norms of the family, and perceptions of masculinity reduce the costs and thereby increase the rewards of using violence (Gelles, 1983). Gelles notes that exchange theory generally holds that if there is sustained lack of reciprocity in the trade of benefits (i.e., one person consistently derives benefits without providing benefits in return), the relationship will be broken off by the person not benefiting. However, in intimate partner violence scenarios, ending the relationship is not always possible even when reciprocity is lacking due to potential imbalance of resources.

Using this theory as an underpinning for understanding intimate partner violence, it is asserted that to reduce the occurrence of violence in a family, rewards must be decreased (by ending the social glorification of violence

that produces rewards), and costs must be increased (stricter legal and/or social consequences must be imposed; Gelles, 1983).

RESOURCE THEORY

Goode (1971) and Allen and Straus (1979) propose the use of resource theory to understand family violence. As first outlined by Goode, resource theory posits that individuals use the resources that are available to them (e.g., income, education, social skills, status, prestige) to achieve their goals. Violence is one resource that can be used to achieve personal interests. The more resources an individual has, the more power that person has available to call upon when needed. However, the more resources are available, the less likely the person will be to deploy physical force as a method of meeting his or her goals. In other words, the resource of violence will be used only when other resources are depleted and, therefore, unavailable. Thus, a person who has low resources in terms of status or income or prestige may be more likely to use violence to achieve the goal of dominance because it is the only resource available.

Allen and Straus (1979) apply this theory specifically to partner violence in noting that “marital violence” (as they call it) occurs more frequently among lower socioeconomic groups. The theory suggests that the imbalance in intimate partner violence among income groups occurs because those with lower income (and, therefore, lower social status and prestige) have fewer legitimate resources to utilize in attaining power. In summary, they state,

This theory implies a correlation between power and violence only under certain circumstances, since power can be maintained by the use of resources other than violence. In short, the relationship between power and marital violence is contingent on what resources, other than violence, are available (p. 189).

SUBCULTURE-OF-VIOLENCE THEORY

The subculture-of-violence theory was developed by Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) as a general theory of violence. It should be noted that the subculture-of-violence theory actually falls outside the parameters of the family violence perspective in that it does not look at the family as the unit of analysis. Rather, it takes a more macro-level perspective in examining the cultural context that produces violent behavior. The theory was not originally applied to intimate partner violence (or even family violence), and in fact it was originally developed through examining criminal homicide. However, because it is cited by many family violence theorists in the core body of literature on family violence (notably Gelles & Straus, 1979; Gelles, 1993; also Bersani & Chen, 1998), it seems to warrant a brief discussion among the family violence perspectives.

In their original writing on the subculture of violence theory, Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) note that the occurrence of violence is not evenly distributed among groups in the social structure; it is concentrated in poor urban areas. The subculture-of-violence theory states that because violence is observed to occur most frequently among a specific subset of the larger community, there is believed to be a value system at work in that subculture that makes violence more likely. They describe the nature of the violent subculture in stating, “[T]here is a potent theme of violence current in the cluster of values that make up the life-style, the socialization process, the interpersonal relationships of individuals living in similar conditions” (p. 140). Those in the subculture learn the values and norms of violence through socialization and social control in their environment. In other words, violence is socially learned and passed on by group members, thus sustaining the subculture of violence. An application of the theory to family violence would suggest that certain subcultures of society (i.e., groups with low socioeconomic status) exhibit higher levels of violence in the family because the norms and values of their group promote the use of violence within family systems.

Feminist Perspectives

In contrast to the theories comprising the family violence framework, feminist perspectives are united by a common central underpinning: Intimate partner violence is fundamentally a gender issue that cannot be adequately understood through any lens that does not include gender as the central component of analysis (see Anderson, 1997; DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Johnson, 1995, 2005, 2006; Kurz, 1989; Yllo, 1993). The seminal, groundbreaking work elucidating the feminist perspective of intimate partner violence is *Violence against Wives: A Case against the Patriarchy* by Dobash and Dobash (1979). This work is cited in nearly all sociological writings on intimate partner violence theory, feminist or otherwise. The fundamental proposition of Dobash and Dobash is that wife abuse is an expression of male domination over women. As they state in the preface of their 1979 work, “The use of physical violence against women in their position as wives is not the only means by which they are controlled and oppressed but it is one of the most brutal and explicit expressions of patriarchal domination” (p. ix).

Dobash and Dobash assert that the patriarchal domination of women through wife abuse (as they call it) is held over from the long cultural history of legally sanctioned male subordination, abuse, and outright ownership of women. They state that despite the fact that it is no longer legal for men to physically beat their wives, this history of inequality is still at work in the fundamental fabric of the marriage relationship in terms of gender roles and norms and social sanctioning of male domination. The contrast of the feminist position compared to family violence theories is clear: They

assert that though there are numerous types of violence within families (such as violence between children, between parents and children, and between spouses), violence against wives is a separate unit of analysis that must be studied on its own. In other words, wife beating is not just another expression of a larger whole of family violence; it is a separate phenomenon with its own causes, correlates, and properties and, therefore, it cannot be viewed through the same lens as other types of family violence.

Dobash and Dobash reject the notion that domestic violence is just as likely to be perpetrated by women (which is one side of a theoretical debate that will be discussed at greater length in subsequent sections of this review). They acknowledge that many couples might experience some occasional use of physical force during conflict, including force used by women, but they note, “[W]e do not consider them to be indicative of a violent relationship nor should we speak of battered wives or battered husbands in such cases—especially when these terms imply the systematic, frequent, and brutal use of physical force” (p. 11).

As previously noted, the feminist perspective advocated by Dobash and Dobash promotes use of gender-specific terms such as *wife beating* over gender-neutral terms such as *spousal abuse* or *marital violence*, believing that these terms “mask centuries of oppression of women and contribute to their further oppression by neutralizing the very word that describes the continued practice of wife beating” (p. 12).

One thing that feminist sociological theories have in common with a family violence perspective is that they both reject the notion that intimate partner violence is the result of individual aberrations or deviance or that it reflects pathology of abnormal families. As stated by Dobash and Dobash, “Rather, men who assault their wives are actually living up to cultural prescriptions that are cherished in Western society—aggressiveness, male dominance, and female subordination—and they are using physical force as a means to enforce that dominance” (p. 24).

Yllo (1993) also advocates for a feminist framework in understanding intimate partner violence, and she specifically contrasts the use of feminist theory with family violence perspectives. Like Dobash and Dobash, Yllo maintains that gender, rather than the family, must be the central unit of analysis in any intimate partner violence theory, as it is the primary framework that defines the problem. She acknowledges the causal complexity of intimate partner violence, but asserts, “Despite this complexity, the most fundamental feminist insight into all of this is quite simple: Domestic violence cannot be adequately understood unless gender and power are taken into account” (p. 47). Though not ruling out the application of other theories (including family violence theories) as potentially useful, she contends that no other theory can be valuable without a feminist component because feminism is “a necessary lens without which any other analytic perspective is flawed” (p. 48). According to the feminist perspective, the theoretical focus

on family conflict in understanding intimate partner violence is misguided because the basis of intimate partner violence is seen as domination, not conflict of personal interest.

Kurz (1989) also provides a comparative analysis of family violence and feminist theories, concluding that “feminist theories portray the realities of battering more accurately” (p. 489). Kurz is one of many scholars who credit feminist activism for identifying intimate partner violence as a problem deserving of attention in the field of sociology and in the general public (see also Gelles, 1993; Dutton, 2006; Dobash & Dobash, 1979). In describing the feminist perspective, Kurz asserts that, conceptually, wife abuse has more in common with rape and sexual harassment than with other types of family violence, such as elder abuse or sibling violence. This point of feminist theory is fundamentally in conflict with the family violence perspective (which views intimate partner violence and other types of family violence as different expressions of the same problem), and it highlights the schism in the theoretical frameworks of the two major lines of analysis.

GENDER SYMMETRY/ASYMMETRY

The issue of gender symmetry is at the heart of the theoretical divide in the examinations of partner violence. As summarized by Johnson (1995), the gender symmetry debate is about the extent to which women are equal perpetrators of violence in intimate relationships. Family violence theorists largely support the notion of gender symmetry, which asserts that women are just as likely as men to use violence in an intimate relationship (see Dutton, 2006; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Steinmetz, 1977; and Straus, 1993). On the other side of the debate, many feminist theorists fundamentally disagree with this proposition, instead arguing that intimate partner violence is asymmetrical in that men are far more likely to use violence in relationships than women and that, to the extent that women do use violence, it is likely to be for self-defense purposes (see DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007; Johnson, 1995; Kurz, 1989; Stark, 2006; Yllo, 1993). Understanding the reasons for the debate on symmetry, which is closely tied to research methodology, requires a closer look at the positions taken by the two sides of this issue.

Dutton (2006) sums up the gender symmetry position, stating, “[W]omen use violence in intimate relationships to the same extent as men, for the same reasons, and with largely the same results” (p. ix). Proponents of the symmetry position believe that there is no fundamental gender difference in the use of violence in an intimate relationship. Many acknowledge that there are gender differences in the *way* violence is used, in that women are more likely to be injured by partner violence, or that men’s use of violence may be more likely to be ongoing (Gelles & Maynard, 1987; Straus, 1993), but the fundamental assumption is that there is an overall equal use of violence that is not determined by gender. In assessing this theoretical assumption, it

is important to note that this perspective was developed based on research data that indicate general gender symmetry in use of violence (Dutton, 2006; Gelles, Straus, & Steinmetz, 1980; Johnson, 1995; Steinmetz, 1977; Straus, 1993). This important point lies at the heart of the symmetry debate that connects to the larger bodies of theory.

Straus (1993) summarizes the body of research that gives rise to the gender symmetry point of view: In surveys of large, national, representative samples of intimate heterosexual partners, the rate of wife-to-husband assault is consistently shown to be about the same as the rate of husband-to-wife assault. Straus states, "It is remarkable that every study that has investigated who initiates violence using methods that do not preclude the possibility of a wife-beating, found that wives initiate violence in a large proportion of cases" (p. 75). Steinmetz (1977) goes even further in her analysis of the data, concluding that there is a problem she calls "battered husband syndrome," in which women enact violence just as often as men, but men do not report their victimization due to the severe social stigma that they would suffer by admitting to being abused by a woman.

There is a body of feminist response to the assertion of gender symmetry based on the survey data. The essential contention of the feminist perspective (that intimate partner violence is asymmetrical) is that the survey data do not reflect the reality that partner abuse is an act by men against women (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2007; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Johnson, 1995; Kurz, 1989; Stark, 2006; Yllo, 1993). Kurz provides a concise summary of the asymmetrical feminist argument in noting that the data supporting gender symmetry do not match the experiences of those who work in law enforcement, the court system, shelters, or emergency rooms, nor do they match the qualitative narratives of women victims. All of these sources contradict the survey data and indicate that it is overwhelmingly females who are the victims of intimate partner violence at the hands of men (Kurz, 1989; Dobash, Dobach, Wilson, & Daly, 1992). In summing up the collective perspective of feminist scholars, Kurz specifically addresses how the survey data portray such a skewed picture of intimate partner violence symmetry, stating that surveys frequently do not differentiate whether reported violent acts were performed in self-defense or who was injured as a result. According to the feminist perspective, these perceived flaws in the survey methodology impact the validity of the data obtained and, therefore, raise fundamental doubts about the entire body of research that suggests symmetry (Dobash et al., 1992).

Though this review is merely a cursory glance at the gender symmetry/asymmetry debate, it is important to describe this debate to promote an understanding of the theoretical development of the two different sociological frameworks on intimate partner violence, as the research methodology used to quantify and describe intimate partner violence has a direct bearing on the theoretical conclusions reached by scholars.

Integrative Perspectives

Though it is easy to interpret the theoretical divide among sociologists as one that reflects fundamental paradigmatic opposition that cannot be bridged, there are researchers and theorists offering integrative or unifying perspectives. Heise (who proposes an integrative theory that will be discussed below) summarizes the necessity of breaking away from the polarized models and developing new, integrative theories to promote understanding of intimate partner violence: “The task of theory building has been severely hampered by the narrowness of traditional academic disciplines and by the tendency of both academics and activists to advance single-factor theories rather than explanations that reflect the full complexity and messiness of real life” (1998, p. 262).

COMMON GROUND WITHIN FEMINIST AND FAMILY VIOLENCE PERSPECTIVES

First, it is important to note that even within the core of the divided theoretical literature, there are those who identify commonalities within the various frameworks. Though generally advocating a feminist perspective, Kurz (1989) points out that there are similarities between the feminist and family violence perspectives. Despite the family violence perspective of gender symmetry, family violence theories do acknowledge that sexist norms exist that shape the use of violence in the family. Kurz also notes that the family violence perspective does view sexism as a contributor to intimate partner violence because, due to sexist social norms, men may be more likely to seek dominance and thereby use violence as a method for achieving that goal. Therefore, according to Kurz, both family violence perspectives and feminist perspectives view sexism as a causal factor of intimate partner violence; the difference is that feminists place sexism at the center of the analysis, whereas family violence theorists see it as only one causal structural factor among many. Gelles and Maynard (1987) echo this identification of common ground, stating clearly, “The radical feminist perspective and a systemic view of family violence are not mutually exclusive” (p. 271). They cite the gender imbalances that are clear—that men initiate more violence, they inflict more harm when using violence, and women have barriers to leaving violent relationships due to social norms—but they do not believe that these imbalances warrant using a gendered lens to understand the problem. Even though editorializing on the feminist perspective with the “radical” descriptor, Gelles and Maynard acknowledge that there is room for overlap of the major viewpoints. In a separate work, Gelles (1993) also credits feminist theory for incorporating advocacy within its framework (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Yllo, 1993)—a point that is used elsewhere to discredit the feminist perspective (Dutton, 2006).

INTEGRATIVE THEORIES

Several sociologists have proposed theories that attempt to forge a new path that veers away from the polarized perspectives that currently dominate the disciplinary views of intimate partner violence. One such theory is offered by Anderson (1997), who suggests integration of the family violence approach and the feminist approach. She defines family violence theory as primarily being concerned with structural inequalities (such as status and income) that mediate the use of violence, as evidenced by the greater preponderance of intimate partner violence among lower-income groups and disadvantaged racial/ethnic minority groups. Conversely, feminism primarily views violence as based in gender inequality and the dominance of men over women. She proposes an integrative perspective based on the precept that structural inequalities *do* influence violent behavior, but those structural factors affect men and women differently. Specifically, Anderson suggests that the family violence-oriented resource theory (which states that fewer social resources make violence more likely to be used to achieve goals) be adapted to utilize a gendered lens in analyzing family violence. She notes that resource theory is supported by the higher rates of intimate partner violence among those who are low-income, lack education, are unmarried, and belong to racial/ethnic minority groups—in other words, those who lack resources. However, the theory suffers from a “theoretical and empirical neglect of how gender matters in the relationship between resources and violence” (p. 657).

The gendered application of resource theory merges feminist theory, family violence theory, and resource theory by examining the ways in which low resources affect men and women differentially. Anderson maintains that, according to feminist theory, gender is socially constructed and maintained and that constructed views of masculinity are associated with attainment of occupational and economic status (i.e., resources). Conversely, constructed views of femininity are not associated with the occupational resources of power and prestige. This is where feminist theory and resource theory meet to form Anderson’s integrated framework. As Anderson notes, “Gender theory proposes that violence is a resource for constructing masculinity and therefore the use of violence will have different meanings for women and men” (p. 658). Anderson’s integrative theory suggests that both social structure and gender matter and, therefore, it uses aspects of both family violence resource theory and feminist theory to address intimate partner violence.

Another integrative theory is proposed by Heise (1998), who suggests the use of an ecological framework for application to gender-based violence. Characterizing intimate partner violence as a type of gender-based violence establishes a feminist framework from the outset, but Heise proposes integrating the feminist perspective with the ecological perspective that is promoted by family violence theorists. Heise argues that theories that consider

multiple causal factors are needed, and she suggests that feminists, in particular, need to expand their theoretical perceptions beyond the patriarchy. Even while challenging feminists to move beyond their single-factor framework, Heise acknowledges that the feminist tendency to rely exclusively on gender-based explanations is understandable given the “discourse on violence that has traditionally been very slow to acknowledge the significance of gender inequalities and power differentials in the etiology of violence directed toward women” and that this has made feminists “understandably reluctant to endorse any theory that is not grounded in a thorough understanding of the way that male privilege operates to perpetuate gender-based abuse” (p. 263). Having said this, Heise states that feminist theories alone are not adequate to explain intimate partner violence because they fail to explain why some men abuse women and others do not.

Heise offers an integrated ecological framework to replace polarized theories, stating, “An ecological approach to abuse conceptualizes violence as a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in an inter-play among personal, situational, and socio-cultural factors” (pp. 263–264). She outlines the same ecological model proposed by Dutton (2006), as originally applied to violence by Belsky (1980), with four nested circles of factors (individual, micro-system, exo-system, macro-system) to be considered in intimate partner violence; however, in contrast to Dutton’s use of the ecological framework, Heise integrates the feminist perspective into it. Heise suggests that ecological theory is apt because it synthesizes bodies of existing knowledge across disciplines and perspectives and expands gender-based feminist theories to include multi-factor theoretical factors outside the patriarchy. She identifies violence-related factors at each ecological level, demonstrating the consideration of non-gender-related factors (e.g., individual history, personality, cultural norms), while highlighting that gender is an essential aspect in the ecological analysis (e.g., male dominance within the family, societal gender norms).

Finally, the theoretical work of Michael Johnson (1995, 2005, 2006) provides an integrative perspective on intimate partner violence. In essence, Johnson (1995) proposes that there are separate forms of intimate partner violence and that the vastly different perspectives of existing theorists arise from the fact that they are, in fact, analyzing different phenomena. Johnson (1995) initially proposed that there were two different forms of violence: *patriarchal terrorism* and *common couple violence*. He defines patriarchal terrorism as the type of violence that feminist theorists are focused on and also the type that most people associate with terms such as *domestic violence* and *wife abuse*. Johnson states, “Patriarchal terrorism, a product of patriarchal traditions of men’s right to control ‘their’ women, is a form of terroristic control of wives by their husbands that involves the systematic use of not only violence, but economic subordination, threats, isolation, and other control tactics” (p. 284). Because it is based in male-centered domination of

women, patriarchal terrorism is fundamentally rooted in gender and can be understood only through a gendered (i.e., feminist) lens. He argues that patriarchal terrorism is a phenomenon completely distinct from the other form of violence, common couple violence, which is not gender-based. In describing common couple violence, Johnson states, "The dynamic is one in which conflict occasionally gets 'out of hand,' leading usually to 'minor' forms of violence, and more rarely escalating into serious, sometimes even life-threatening, forms of violence" (p. 284). Common couple violence is rooted in conflict, not patriarchal domination, and as such it can be examined and understood through the lens of family violence perspectives. Johnson notes that common couple violence is the type of violence being analyzed by Straus, Gelles, and other family violence theorists, and it is no more likely to be initiated and used by men than by women.

The issue of gender symmetry lies at the center of Johnson's typology, which helps explain how two groups of scholars from the same field can view the same issue in such fundamentally different terms. According to Johnson, the symmetry debate assumes that both bodies of theorists are examining and analyzing the same subject. Johnson's proposes that this is not true, suggesting that the different methodologies used to examine intimate partner violence are actually measuring different, non-overlapping populations that are experiencing qualitatively different forms of violence, which is why the different methods produce such different results.

In explaining how the different methodologies actually measure different phenomena, Johnson states that large national surveys analyzed by family violence researchers

reach only populations in which violence is a relatively isolated reaction to conflict (common couple violence) while studies using data from shelters and other public agencies [the method used by feminist-oriented researchers] reach primarily victims of violent, but multifaceted, strategies of control (patriarchal terrorism) (p. 288).

According to Johnson, both methods of data collection have built-in sampling biases that determine what they are measuring, which results in different populations being measured. Shelter populations studied by feminist researchers measure only the experiences of those women whose husbands have continued to assault them and, therefore, they are primarily capturing those who have experienced patriarchal terrorism. Survey populations studied by family violence theorists are also biased because men who are patriarchal terrorists are unlikely to answer accordingly in a survey, and women who are being terrorized are likely to be too scared to answer honestly; therefore, the survey data are primarily capturing only those who have experienced common couple violence.

Though Johnson was the first theorist to develop and define a specific typology, the idea that there are different forms of partner violence was

foreshadowed in the 1979 work of Dobash and Dobash, who admonished that wife abuse as patriarchal domination should not be confused with occasional use of force during normal conflict between couples. In later works, Johnson (2005, 2006) refined his typology, adding two more categories of violence and changing the terminology of the two initially identified types. In addition to patriarchal terrorism (now called *intimate terrorism*) and common couple violence (now called *situational couple violence*), Johnson added *violent resistance* and *mutual violent control*. Violent resistance is defined as “violence utilized in response to intimate terrorism” (Johnson, 2005, p. 1127). Mutual violent control is a rare situation in which both partners are violent and controlling of each other. Johnson specifies in his later work (2006) that the types are distinguished by the degree of control that each entails, not by the severity of the violence.

CONCLUSION

Two bodies of theory—family violence and feminist—clearly define the sociological literature on intimate partner violence. Figure 1 provides a conceptual map that illustrates the major lines of analysis in the theoretical literature. As visually displayed in the figure, the role of gender is the dividing line that separates family violence and feminist perspectives along multiple dimensions, including symmetry of violence, unit of analysis, and cause.

The common underpinning of family violence theories is that violence is caused by structural factors that lead to conflict, that the family is the central unit of analysis, and that intimate partner violence is just one mode of the

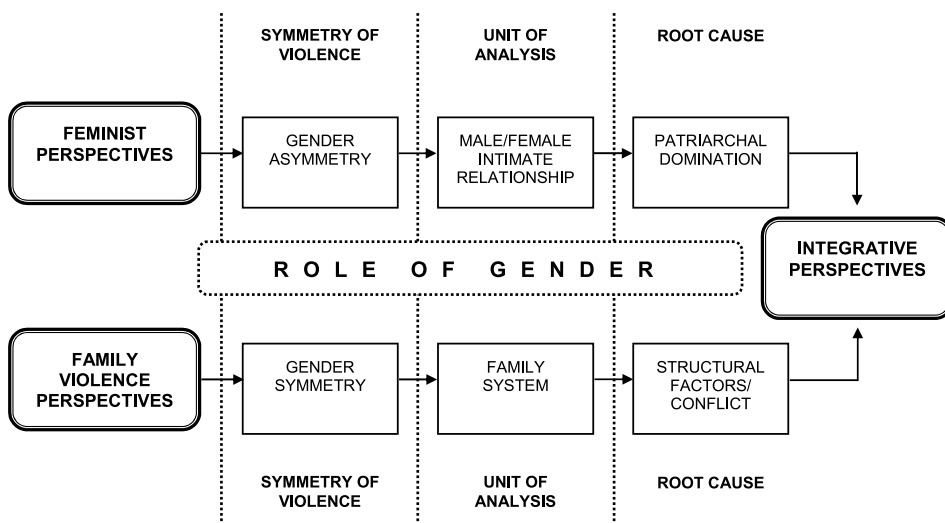


FIGURE 1 Sociological perspectives on intimate partner violence.

larger whole of family violence. Family violence perspectives also tend to view intimate partner violence as gender-symmetrical in that it is generally as likely to be used by women as by men. As such, multiple theories can be used to understand violence using a family violence perspective. Systems theory is a broad, overarching framework that highlights the interconnectedness and responsiveness of the elements that comprise family systems, in which violence is viewed as the product of systemic interactions. Ecological theory focuses on the individual as the center of many levels of variables that influence behavior (including violence) in a multi-causal way. Resource theory suggests that violence is only one of many resources available that individuals can utilize to attain their goals, and that individuals are more likely to use violence when other resources for attaining power are not available. The subculture-of-violence theory proposes that violence is a socially learned behavior that is transmitted through social norms and values of particular subcultures, making members of certain groups more likely to use violence.

In contrast, feminist perspectives see gender as the central aspect of partner violence, which is seen as a gender-specific expression of patriarchal domination of women by men in intimate relationships. Feminist theorists believe that intimate partner violence cannot be adequately understood through any framework that does not include gender as the primary lens of analysis. Intimate partner violence is seen as qualitatively different than other forms of violence in the family due to its gender-based nature.

Though it would be easy to see this theoretical polarization as intractable, some theoretical integrations show that there is common ground and the potential for theory development that incorporates aspects of both frameworks. Continued examination of the problem of intimate partner violence is important to refinement of existing theory and the development of new theories. Because of the central role of theory in driving research, policy, and ultimately practice, continued theoretical dialogue is vital. Ideological debate without forward progress could impede the development of interventions that address the real-life problem of intimate partner violence. Finally, because the theoretical literature is so driven by the differences in methodologies used to study the problem, research on intimate partner violence should continue to strive for measurement techniques that provide a coherent and unbiased description of the problem.

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