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Vilification of the “batterer”: How blame shapes domestic violence policy and interventions

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Abstract

This article explores ways in which the vilification of the “batterer” — the popular, policy, and “scientific” legitimization of the dismissive and degrading categorization of perpetrators — has influenced research, policy, and intervention in the field of domestic violence. The historical, political, ideological, legal, and theoretical bases of this process are reviewed. Factors behind the convergence of feminist and law enforcement perspectives are discussed. Current policies and practices are described as being unnecessarily constrained and unresponsive to a wide range of families and relationships. Vilification exerts its impact on policy through a rhetoric of blame, portraying perpetrators as undeserving of a broader range of interventions and services.

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1. Introduction

We are all responsible for finding ways of deconstructing the enemy camps inside and around us. It remains an immense challenge to dissolve the enemy mentality and defense structures we wage against ourselves and others, yet it appears to be the only way forward if we wish our children to inherit more than the ruins of closed hearts.

(K.L. Schmidt, from *Transforming Abuse*, 1995, p. 94)

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The purpose of this article is to explore ways in which the “vilification of the batterer” — the popular, policy, and “scientific” legitimization of the dismissive and degrading categorization of perpetrators — has influenced research, policy, and intervention in the field of domestic violence. It addresses questions as to how ideology may be suppressing theory development, how it is that less ideological — and possibly more effective — approaches are being screened out, and how rhetoric tends to overwhelm science with respect to perpetrators of domestic violence, effectively impeding interdisciplinary synthesis and application of new knowledge to policy design and program implementation in the field.

It is our contention that in order to achieve greater clarity with respect to those labeled as “batterers” — that is, to determine what is effective and what is not in terms of interrupting and preventing abusive behavior within the context of family — we must be willing to disentangle issues of blame, stigma, and censure from issues of etiology, intervention, and outcome. Furthermore, we must be willing to challenge some related notions: that vilification of perpetrators is a necessary component of advocating for those who are victimized by violence, and that a willingness to vilify is a valid indicator of one’s legitimacy, expertise, and commitment to social justice where issues of domestic violence are concerned.

2. The cycle of violence: predestination and the inevitability of “battering”

As Rochefort (1986) observed, the social image of those implicated in a particular social problem evolves over time from within a particular sociopolitical and historical context. Furthermore, it is the convergence of social image and the socioeconomic, political, and cultural specifics of the contemporary moment that determine whether a given set of problem individuals will be censured or be seen as deserving and offered help by the society at large. Thus, how we perceive perpetrators of domestic violence may be the single most important factor in determining our policies toward them.

Pleck (1987) notes that the American public’s perception of domestic violence — in terms of causes, contributing factors, and potential for cure — has tended to cycle back and forth between extremes over the past century and a half, depending on those sociopolitical forces and conditions prevailing in any given era. Such perceptions have then been expressed in the valorization or condemnation of victims, for example, in the public’s preoccupation with social control of “undesirable” social elements (e.g., immigrants) alternating with concerns for the sanctity and privacy of the family, and in ideologies of social purity and temperance posited as countervailing correctives for male misbehavior vs. resurgent and publicly expressed fears of the potential feminization of America.

In contemporary American culture, current social perceptions, sociopolitical phenomena, and cultural forces have created a dynamic such that vilification of the “batterer” has become an acceptable conceptual and strategic frame from within which to address perpetrators of domestic violence. Because the problem is identified as “battering” and perpetrators are defined as “batterers” deserving of vilification, this in turn shapes what sorts of research and policy questions get asked, how those questions get asked, and how those questions are then answered in terms of policy and program initiatives.

Even the use of the label “batterer” begins to shape our perceptions in approaching the problem, activating a set of associations and assumptions that may or may not be pertinent to the issues at hand. Part of the process of problem definition necessarily involves a determination of terms to be used in describing targeted populations or help recipients, and use of the term “batterer” serves immediately to define all perpetrators as if they represent the worst of the behavior (i.e., premeditated, escalating, terroristic, chronic) that occurs in family violence, ignoring and/or collapsing important distinctions along various dimensions of the problem — degree of severity, for example, or periodicity of occurrence.

Furthermore, at the level of individual perpetrator, the problem of domestic violence is currently characterized as a sort of “slippery slope” — once the “batterer” starts, he cannot stop, and the situation simply goes from bad to worse as a matter of course. This is at once reminiscent of Calvinistic notions of unregenerate sinners unable to resist further wrongdoing, and of addiction and disease models in which decline is seen as inevitable, progressive, and irreversible.

Under the definition of a helping situation typology as described by [Chatterjee \(1985\)](#), this conceptualization of the “batterer” partakes of both the “evil or bad” model (blaming the help recipient) and the “deviance” model (help recipients in need of correcting). As [Beisser \(1972\)](#) points out, such models are both explanatory theories of problematic human conditions and behaviors, and implied prescriptions for ameliorating, adjusting, or controlling them, and they evolve out of the philosophies and value systems of those seeking to intervene.

As a quasi-theoretical formulation, the vilification of the “batterer” is based on a closed system of logic, which begins by identifying the most violent perpetrators of domestic violence, labels them as “batterers,” and then retrospectively analyzes the escalation of their behavior as having been inevitable. This focus on the most violent offenders then appears to demonstrate the inevitability of escalation in all cases, and reinforces commonly held assumptions and beliefs, such as that all domestic violence has the same pattern, all offenders have the same personality characteristics, and all perpetrator behavior is premeditated and strategic in nature.

This view of domestic violence perpetration is illustrated in two popular and frequently replicated schematic representations of interrelated phases and categories of abuse, the “Cycle of Violence” ([Walker, 1979](#)), and the “Power and Control Wheel” (Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, 1984 in [Pence & Paymar, 1993](#)). Various versions and spin-offs of these diagrams are now found in any number of informational pamphlets, handbooks, and web pages dealing with domestic violence in both the United States and overseas. Many of these have incorporated into either the diagram or the text accompanying it the notion of inevitable escalation (see, for example, [Crisis Support Network, Washington State, 2000](#); [Tompkins County Task Force for Battered Women, 1999](#); [West Virginia Bureau for Public Health, 2000](#); [Women’s Issues and Social Empowerment \[W.I.S.E.\], Melbourne, Australia, 1998](#)). Similarly, the texts of various government publications often present as incontrovertible fact “the” pattern of abuse, reporting as inevitable a pattern of escalation in all cases of domestic violence (see, for example, [Zubretsky, 1996](#)).

It is important to note that such views as to the inevitability of progression, as well as to the terroristic and strategic nature of all domestic violence, are based mainly on the experiences

and observations of those working in women's shelters, as well as other service providers, and so does not take into account the full range and complexity of the problem as it manifests in the society at large (see, for example, Johnson, 1995; Wofford, Mihalic, & Menard, 1994). Data disproportionately representative of shelter and criminal justice samples, by definition those "worst case" and egregious situations that necessarily come to the attention of law enforcement and crisis workers, may be obscuring other dimensions and variations of domestic violence, making it difficult to identify and differentiate accurately a more comprehensive range of perpetrator behavior patterns, etiologies, and contributing factors. For example, in revisiting several major studies, Johnson (1995) is able to draw a distinction between "common couple violence" and "patriarchal terrorism," claiming that apparent disparities in findings between various of these studies on domestic violence are the result of differences in sampling strategy that are capturing different — yet equally legitimate — aspects of the overall problem.

Similarly, Wofford et al. (1994) find that up to one-half of all marital violence is in fact suspended over a period of 3 years among the more general population, rather than escalating as is more generally predicted. Furthermore, as Letellier (1994) and Merrill (1996) have observed, the tendency of those working in the domestic violence field to focus on heterosexual domestic violence, and on "battered wives" in particular, has further limited our abilities to fully examine the various degrees, permutations, and dimensions of the problem as it plays out on a daily basis within the context of a myriad of family forms, individual developmental, and psychosocial histories, and specific domestic and intimate interactions.

Thus, our current perceptions have led us to simplistic explanations and limited treatment options in addressing the behavior of "batterers." Unfortunately, many of these explanations are based on a stagnant body of theory and the treatment may not work in many cases. The evaluation literature on treatment outcomes for domestic violence perpetrators presents an equivocal picture at best, providing little solid evidence that currently accepted methods of treatment consistently reduce violent behavior over the long term, even among those who manage to complete the programs (Babcock & Steiner, 1999; Eisikovits & Edleson, 1989; Gondolf, 1999; National Institute of Justice, 1998). The typical program for these offenders is same-sex, group psychoeducational or cognitive behavioral treatment of 10–36 weeks in length, with content emphasizing rational emotive principles and pro-feminist gender relations (Edleson, 1996; Eisikovits & Edleson, 1989). While methodologically sophisticated studies that control for those factors that may compromise findings (e.g., behavior of program dropouts) are not common, on balance the literature does not support the effectiveness, and certainly does not justify the hegemony, of such typical "batterer" treatment.

Treatment protocols for "batterers" are controlled by standards or guidelines developed and disseminated by governmental or quasi-governmental domestic violence "certifying" agencies in states (and some counties), thus determining which approaches are permitted at the local programmatic level (National Institute of Justice, 1998). This control is directly or indirectly premised upon policy models that have at their heart a social construction of domestic violence as patriarchy-sanctioned "battering." This view, as pioneering authors

Dobash and Dobash (1978) asserted, is that “battering” is not essentially deviant vis-à-vis the larger society, but rather:

...it is a form of behavior which has existed for centuries as an acceptable, and indeed, a desirable part of a patriarchal family system within a patriarchal society, and much of the ideology and many of the institutional arrangements which supported patriarchy through the subordination, domination, and control of women are still reflected in our (contemporary) culture and social institutions. (p. 472)

From this theoretical standpoint, perpetrators of domestic violence must be viewed and responded to in certain ways: they can only be male; their behavior is not deviant, but rather culturally sanctioned; since not deviant, any association of their violent behavior with other problematic conditions is spurious or irrelevant; and since rooted in patriarchy, this behavior does not share etiological processes with other forms of family violence.

In practice, this view functions so as to isolate domestic violence initiatives from other sources of information important to program development, such as basic research on aggression. In order to maintain prescribed policy boundaries with respect to domestic violence, “battering” must be viewed as somehow separate from related phenomena, such as child abuse, and from contributory phenomena, such as chemical dependency. Furthermore, “batterers” must be seen as undeserving of the more complex psychosocial characterizations used to develop explanations and treatments for other, related forms of behaviors (for example, the provision of social support in addressing the isolation of perpetrators of child abuse). These delineations of “batterers” and “battering” have given rise to, and are supported by, the “vilification of the batterer” the popular, policy, and “scientific” designation of perpetrators of partner violence as being appropriate targets for dismissive, degrading, and stereotypical characterizations. For example, [Jacobson and Gottman \(1998\)](#), in *When Men Batter Women: New Insights into Ending Abusive Relationships*, refer to perpetrators of domestic violence as “cobras” and “pit bulls” to describe clusters of psychological and behavioral characteristics identified through their research. The academic press (and perhaps even the popular press) would not accept typologies of parents who abused their children as, say, “hyenas” or “rattlesnakes,” the profound misery and waste of human potential caused by child abuse notwithstanding. What, then, accounts for our willingness to tolerate or endorse such characterizations with respect to “batterers?”

The vilification of “batterers” is usually more subtle, however, than outright comparison to dangerous animals. More generally, it involves biased and exaggerated statements with respect to men who physically abuse — furthermore, a tone of cynicism often prevails (see Appendix A for further examples):

Batterers are facile manipulators and can easily give the appearance of cooperation and rehabilitation ... the batterer’s ability to charm and con selected important people ... stands him in good stead in (legal proceedings) ... The batterer (appears) ... genuine and sincere ... (from a discussion of divorce mediation, [Walker, 1987, p. 141](#))

Be vigilant about male bonding — batterers *love* to stick up for each other against their partners. (Italics added; from a ‘batterer’ treatment provider, in *Batterer Intervention: Program Approaches and Criminal Justice Strategies*, National Institute of Justice, 1998, p. 45)

How have such views of domestic violence perpetrators, for example, as being *by definition* conscious and strategic coconspirators, come to be so widely accepted? What explains the persistence of such views as a basis for policy and intervention, in spite of repeated acknowledgments, even by those concerned that the line between explaining and excusing violent behavior is too easily blurred, that complex, multifactorial processes are most likely at work in the production of domestically violent men (see, for example, Bograd, 1992; Miller, 1994; Renzetti, 1994; Yllo, 1993)?

This view presents a serious dilemma for many of those working, teaching, and conducting research in the field of domestic violence. For those who are duty-bound by professional ethical codes and standards (e.g., NASW Code of Ethics) to honor individual difference, to bear compassionate witness to human pain, whether of victim or perpetrator, and to recognize and build on the slightest potential for meaningful change even in those who have no such hopes for themselves, it is essential that speech, action, and inquiry in consonance with stated beliefs as to the complexity of the problem be allowed to go forward. If not, we risk allowing these ethical precepts to function merely as pro forma place holders in a rhetorical stance grown so habitual that we no longer hear the words even as we ourselves are speaking them.

3. Coopting feminism?

Much of current theory, policy, and intervention with respect to “battering” and “batterers” is grounded in Second Wave feminist initiatives and imperatives formulated in the 1970s and early 1980s (see, for example, Bograd, 1984; Dobash & Dobash, 1978; Martin, 1981; Walker, 1979). However, it can be argued that in setting and maintaining a policy course with respect to domestic violence the more visionary aspects and dimensions of feminist theory, radical or otherwise, have been largely ignored.

Contributions to Second Wave feminist theory such as follows have been left behind in current formulations of domestic violence policy and intervention: Millett’s (1969) appreciative analysis of Freud’s contributions to contemporary notions of human psychology, both male and female; Rich’s (1977, 1979) interests both in developing a new psychology of male behavior with respect to aggression, and in closing the perceived gap between the psychological and the political self, a dichotomy that she felt to be artificial and problematic for both men and women; Chodorow’s (1978) reworking of Freudian theory, and her related discourse on the sociology of gender and the reproduction of mothering; Stoltenberg’s (1989) complex discussions of the interplay of biology, psychology, and acculturation in the construction of male sexual identity; and finally, numerous works of fiction that explored questions of male violence, the psychology of perpetration, gender role constraints and

expectations, and the human capacity for transformation and redemption with compassion and clarity (see, for example, Bryant, 1971; Olsen, 1974; Walker, 1970).

As Pleck (1987) points out, in most important social movements the more ambitious and innovative theorists and their social experiments tend not to prevail or endure once the philosophical tenets of that movement enter mainstream cultural consciousness, and questions of funding, service delivery, and leadership at the local level must then be addressed. The initial identification and delineation of domestic violence as a social problem evolved out of (mostly radical) feminist descriptions and analyses of family dynamics, an accounting of their daily lives that resonated powerfully for many women at the time. However, the interpretation and application of that theory, in terms of implementing a social response to the problem, has often fallen prey to selective essentialism with respect to gender roles, motivations, and characteristics, and to the oversimplification and selective application of theory as well.

In part, this is simply a function of the vagaries of collective memory and the passage of time. For example, while the rhetoric of the women's movement persists in various forms throughout the domestic violence field to this day, for the most part a full appreciation of the historical context and complexity of that rhetoric's theoretical underpinnings appears to have fallen away. Furthermore, while many of those not directly involved in the women's movement absorbed in broad outline some of its basic ideas through popular culture — vague notions of “the patriarchy” as an apparatus of control, for example — they have tended to then interpret such tenets in terms of those reductionistic dichotomies and stereotypical oppositions that have informed their own acculturation, often replicating and reinforcing familiar gender roles and stereotypes (woman as victim, man as abuser, for example).

In addition, sociopolitical and cultural reactivity to some of the more difficult and threatening aspects of the women's movement — issues of separatism, of the social construction of gender and sexual identity, of the viability of heterosexual family structure, for example — has tended over time to result in a watering down of what for many people are the scarier aspects of feminist theory. Given also the consonance of some aspects of feminist theory with various of the philosophical precepts of the criminal justice system (Eisikovits & Edleson, 1989; National Institute of Justice, 1998; Pleck, 1987; Schechter, 1996), as well as the recent trend towards the recriminalization of “deviance” (Bursztajn, Scherr, & Brodsky, 1993; Fagan, 1996), and one might suspect that a degree of cooption of the feminist model to serve law and order purposes has occurred, in effect allowing the vilification of domestic violence perpetrators to take hold as officially sanctioned policy.

Certainly, there is historical precedent for such sociopolitical sleight of hand, for the substitution of regressive social control measures for progressive policy in the guise of social enlightenment, particularly where the welfare of women and children is putatively concerned. This maneuver can be seen, for example, in First Wave feminist efforts to legitimize the flogging of “wife-beaters” as state-sanctioned policy in various states across the country — between 1882 and 1905, three states did institute such measures (Maryland, Delaware, and Oregon), and it was seriously discussed in dozens of other state legislatures as well (Pleck, 1987). Originally proposed by feminist activists frustrated by the inefficacy of previous reform efforts in ameliorating the problem of domestic violence, in actual effect this mode of punishment was seized upon in various communities as a means of selectively controlling

those elements of the population — immigrant and African American men, in particular — about whose growing numbers and reputed morals there was much public consternation at the turn of the century. The end result of such legislation was that disproportionate numbers of African American men were subjected to the whipping post — the “Red Hannah,” as they referred to it — while relatively few white men who engaged in domestic violence suffered the same consequence (Pleck, 1987).

Similarly, the Ku Klux Klan has on occasion tried to claim the moral high ground through appeals to sentimental notions about the sanctity of family, claiming as their own mission the protection of women and children from the ravages of those they designate as “villainous ne’er do wells” (Pleck, 1987). This championing of the family proved an early effective ploy for the Klan in securing a degree of legitimacy for their project of enforcing a social and moral order consonant with their own notions of reality, and punishing those who fail to comply. A turn-of-the-century social scientist comments on the efficacy of the Klan’s intervention in a case of domestic violence with a mildly approving air, ignoring the ethical implications of such vigilante tactics when deployed from within the context of a democracy (Calhoun, 1919):

It is of interest to observe in passing that the Ku Klux Klan had opportunity to exercise disciplinary functions on other than Negroes. One man who was in the habit of beating his wife unmercifully and failed to furnish support for his family found his house surrounded one night by a ghostly crowd who informed him that after a certain period they would return for business, unless he went to work and treated his family better. Thenceforth, there was not a more industrious man in the region. (p. 16)

What contemporary trends toward the vilification of “batterers” have in common with these seemingly extreme examples is the assertion of a righteous certitude in an effort to ensure a preferred social order, a means both of maintaining control and of diffusing anxiety while doing so. Specific dimensions of this certitude tend to manifest in such tactics as scapegoating, demonizing, and calls for an eye-for-an-eye style of retribution, all of which elements can be found to varying degrees in the present day vilification of domestic violence perpetrators.

The source of vilification, then, is not feminism, nor even the limits of feminist explanatory models in addressing issues of domestic violence. Rather, the problem is one of fundamentalism, whether arising from the right, the left, or somewhere in between. In referring to the push for feminist orthodoxy from within the domestic violence field, Erickson (1992) points out that fundamentalism is not so much about specific content as it is a way of holding a belief. It is a means of creating a comforting illusion of solid footing where there may be none. When many feminists find themselves arguing for stronger control initiatives (Bograd, 1992), agreeing with conservatives as to the need to criminalize social deviance (National Institute of Justice, 1998), or joining in the vilification of the “batterer” (see Appendix A), caution and reappraisal may be called for.

The effects of vilification manifest in a variety of ways and to varying degrees in pro-feminist approaches to domestic violence issues. Perhaps most often, however, there is a privileging of heterosexual females and/or “wives” in the name of redressing the wrongs of

heterosexual male perpetrators. For example, most profeminist discourse on the subject of domestic violence begins with some sort of acknowledgment of the scope and complexity of the problem, and of the dimensions of diversity involved (i.e., male victims, female perpetrators, gay and lesbian couples). This rhetoric of inclusion tends to unravel, however, in subsequent disclaimers, such as follows: “This article addresses the 91 to 95 percent of all adult domestic violence assaults that are perpetrated by men against their female partners. . . .” (Frohmman & Grossman, 2001, p. 5); or, “. . .To simplify things, I will focus only on wife abuse. . . .” (Bograd, 1992).

In general, profeminist discussions of female perpetration (i.e., females as initiators of violence), or of gay and lesbian couple violence, tend to devolve into brief citations of the data only in terms of comparative proportions or percentages, which are then dismissed as negligible when compared to the more common pattern of male heterosexual perpetration (e.g., Miller, 1994; Renzetti, 1994). The consequences of female perpetration are similarly glossed over, tending to be characterized only as disproportionate to the consequences of male perpetration, or dismissed as overwhelmingly a matter of self-defense, which claim somehow renders moot any discussion of those incidences *not* having to do with self-defense (Yllo, 1993).

The effects of vilification can also be seen in a willingness to indulge in broad characterizations and differential applications of feminist theoretical precepts. Where female-initiated perpetration is concerned, for example, issues of intent are generally set aside, and where male perpetration is concerned, malevolent intent is generally assumed (see, for example, Bograd, 1992). This results in such odd formulations as the following, in which discriminatory practice is characterized as justified (Miller, 1994, citing Hamberger & Potente, 1996):

. . .Hamberger and Potente introduce the neutral term ‘domestically violent’ women to describe and label women who assault their partners, a term they believe is context-descriptive without relying on politically or value-laden pejorative connotations of power and injury associated with terms used to describe male batterers of women. . . . (p. 190)

It can also be argued that, in addition to issues of stigma and discrimination with respect to vilification, the imperative to denigrate “batterers” is what most undermines construct validity with respect to feminist causal theory. Particularly limiting may be recurrent cautions against substantive incorporation of information from the fields of psychology and psychiatry in formulating theories of etiology. This proscription has been explained mainly in terms of concerns that the behavior of perpetrators will be excused through psychological explanations (Bograd, 1988; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 1997). However, to explain behavior is not necessarily to excuse it, and it is inherently unfair, if not illogical, to allow women a psychology that reacts to patriarchal structure — and feminist theory has always done this — while denying men a psychology forged in it.

The link between individual violence and “patriarchy,” for example, has yet to be fully explained at the interface of individual and sociocultural structure — further, the concept of “patriarchy” is so loosely defined as to be meaningless. As O’Neil and Harway (1997) observe, there has been relatively little detailed analysis of those processes by which socialization is thought to produce male violence in general, or domestic violence in

particular. With respect to broad sociopolitical theories of acculturation as being determinant of individual behavior, [Dutton \(1994\)](#) points out that it is most likely that, “. . . patriarchy must interact with psychological variables in order to account for the great variation in power-violence data” (p. 167). Furthermore, as [Ingold \(2000\)](#) states that:

. . . the idea of culture as consisting in transmissible and diffusable bundles of instructions is based on the false assumptions, firstly, that the meaning of each instruction can be specified independently of the particular environmental contexts of its application, and secondly, stemming from this, that information is tantamount to knowledge. For another thing, no known form of learning in human society can reasonably be described as a simple process of replication . . . what people do is embedded in lifelong histories of engagement, as whole beings, with their surroundings, and is not the mechanical output of interaction between prereplicated instructions (whether genetic or cultural) and prespecified (sic) environmental conditions. . . . (p. 2)

Furthermore, given that cross-cultural studies do not support broad generalizations vis-à-vis the cooccurrence of domestic violence and patriarchal social structures ([Dutton, 1994](#)), formulations as to the uniform imposition of “the” patriarchy on family structure and norms within a given culture are problematic — more refined models are called for if mechanisms of “patriarchal culture” are to be understood as a viable means of explaining domestic violence. As suggested by [Lockridge \(1992\)](#), for instance, in a discussion of the historical roots of American misogyny, the American version of “patriarchy” as deployed within the confines of the family may function more like temporarily disassembled weaponry than a permanent state of fully engaged battle, in its very contingency a powerful enough mode of control.

[Bograd \(1992\)](#) acknowledges that, “all of our competing theories and practices remain sadly incomplete. In-fighting and theoretical self-righteousness are no way to begin this enterprise” (p. 252). Should feminist scholars choose to push the envelope as to more precise delineations of the sociocultural construction of domestic violence in its various manifestations, or to incorporate psychological variables into current explanatory models, nothing inherent to feminist theory prevents this, as those feminists working within the field often point out ([Bograd, 1992](#); [Miller, 1994](#); [Renzetti, 1994](#); [Walker, 1999](#); [Yllo, 1993](#)). Furthermore, feminist theory is not monolithic, and interdisciplinary synthesis and theoretical innovation are not in any way precluded by a feminist orientation ([Enns, 1992](#)). Ecofeminist theory, for example, brings into play the interdependence of micro, mezzo, and macro variables in analyzing cultural and sociopolitical phenomena, and so might lend itself to a more in-depth analysis of phenomena of domestic violence (see, for example, [Warren & Erkal, 1997](#)).

It must be recognized that the vilification of the “batterer,” in and of itself, is not feminist. If anything, such a habit of mind constitutes a betrayal of basic feminist principles, a violation of the spirit and intent of a feminist epistemology which was to inform the translation of utopian ideals into concrete actions and initiatives in achieving a more just society. Such a feminist epistemology was to ensure, for example, the honoring of process, and of complex

interpersonal systems. It was to encourage dialectical, “both/and” thinking, as opposed to the “either/or” dualism attributed to “patriarchal” mindsets. It was to foster an awareness that “the personal is political,” that individual psychology, motivations, and actions impact at cultural and sociopolitical levels. It was to avoid the projection of our own unacceptable fears and thoughts onto those perceived as somehow “other than” ourselves; it was to eschew the wholesale objectification and dismissal of entire classes of people (see, for example, Bunch, 1976; DuPlessis & Members of Workshop 9, 1980; Hartssock, 1975; Stanley & Wolfe [Robbins], 1978).

Those working in the field of domestic violence must be allowed to make good on feminist claims as to the purported value of examining the full range of the problem as it manifests along a variety of dimensions, of recognizing complex and multifactorial etiological processes at work in the perpetuation of the problem, and in rejecting stereotypical characterizations of males as well as females, without either their feminist loyalties or compassion credentials being called into question. Furthermore, advocacy for victims should not be confused with the vilification of perpetrators — as Istar (1996) remarks in discussing couple’s counseling within a context of domestic violence, “. . . we also must accept our loyalty to the humanity of the abusive partner. Both lives are of value. It is one thing for a survivor to insist that her batterer is ‘incurable’ — understandable, and perhaps essential to her healing; it is quite another thing for therapists to bring this assumption into the treatment milieu” (p. 100).

It must also be acknowledged that in terms of raw numbers, less common phenomena of domestic violence (e.g., among gay and lesbian couples, female perpetrators, or real mutuality of violence) certainly are common enough to radically impact the lives of the many men, women, and children who are marginalized by current approaches to the problem. Even a small percent of millions of violent relationships is not an insignificant number. Moreover, if examined carefully, such less usual phenomena as female-initiated perpetration or gay and lesbian domestic violence would likely yield valuable information as to what about domestic violence perpetration is gender-specific, and what is not.

Finally, as Schechter (1996) points out, feminist theory has been limited in its ability to translate theory into effective preventive strategies, and it is prevention that is — or should be — the crux of the issue with respect to intervention in intergenerational cycles of abuse. Stigmatizing, and so alienating, those from whom we have most to learn in this regard — those for whom violence has become a viable strategy, for whatever reason — will greatly impede progress in this direction.

4. Consequences of vilification: research, policy, practice

The consequences of the vilification of the “batterer” go beyond stigma and a hobbling of feminist theory, however, for its influence can be seen in other areas of scholarship and theory development as well. In general, present etiological theories of “battering” fall into three major camps: psychological, intergenerational transmission, and feminist. Prevailing psychological theories identify the influence of personality and mental health issues. Intergenera-

tional transmission has tended to emphasize the learning of violent behavior in childhood. Feminism, as has been discussed, generally identifies the source of “battering” as the concerted efforts of men to maintain dominance in a society organized around gendered disparities in power. Basic research and explanatory theories of violence, in general, have become largely irrelevant in the development of policy and theories of intervention for domestic violence perpetrators. The considerable body of research on the etiology of violent behavior is often ignored by those developing policy and regulating services. Fagan (1996) states, “. . . theory and research on domestic violence have segregated theories of violence from research on batterers. The social and ideological constructions of battering have limited the types of variables considered in research on domestic violence” (p. 29).

This basic research on violence and aggression includes studies on biophysiological and psychological/behavioral sequelae of abuse and neglect (Garbarino, 1999; Karr-Morse & Wiley, 1997; Lewis, 1992; Van der Kolk, 1999; Van der Kolk, Burbridge, & Suzuki, 1997; Van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996); human psychobiological development, parenting practices, and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew, 1994; Dutton, van Ginkel, & Starzomski, 1995; Fraser, 1999; Smith, 1994); psychoneurological factors (Warnken, Rosenbaum, Fletcher, Hoge, & Adelman, 1994; Westby & Ferraro, 1999); drug and alcohol effects (O’Farrell, Van Hutton, & Murphy, 1999); and perception, cognition, and intent, among others. Demographic and epidemiological studies of violence describe variations in rates of incidence, perpetrator and victim characteristics, geographic and economic factors, and others. There is abundant information available about the etiology and enactment of violence to better inform domestic violence treatment. However, an ideological firewall exists between such information and intervention efforts. Taken together, what these studies suggest is that any intervention based on simplistic causal models for domestic violence, especially those lacking important connections to basic scientific research, and without strong support from evaluation research, *must* rely on ideological or political premises for their continued existence.

In a sense, the most significant impact of the vilification of the “batterer” in the area of theory development lies in what has *not* happened. There appears to have been a chilling effect on scholarship produced by an unwillingness to challenge the hegemony of this view. Cautious, obligatory nods to rhetoric are common. This is often subtle and functions paradigmatically. For example, intergenerational transmission models of “battering” rely heavily on social learning theory (Corvo & Carpenter, 2000). This reliance on social learning theory promotes the view that male domestic violence is learned most directly through the childhood observation of violence, particularly the domestic violence perpetuated by one’s father. This view of intergenerational transmission preserves some of the elements of “patriarchy” (e.g., social learning of abusive male behavior), while ignoring a host of other psychosocial risk factors (biological factors, community factors, family stress, etc.) included routinely in theory development and research in other areas.

However, if the intergenerational transmission process, which results in higher rates of adult spousal violence for male child observers of violence, is primarily a pattern of learned strategies by which those same males learn power and control tactics for the dominance of women, several important questions go unanswered. What explains the concurrence of child

abuse and spousal violence within so many households (Sappington, 2000)? What explains spousal violence perpetrated by men who grow up in fatherless homes? What explains the greater prevalence of mental health issues among perpetrators of domestic violence (Dutton, 1999; Holtzworth-Munroe, Bates, Smutzler, & Sandin, 1997)? What explains domestic violence perpetrated by women (Hamberger & Potente, 1996; Straus and Gelles, 1986)? What adequately explains violent behavior in gay and lesbian relationships (Letellier, 1994; Merrill, 1996)?

Those working within the field of domestic violence who fail to adequately incorporate elements of vilification in their analyses are frequently advised in various governmental and scholarly publications to acknowledge the possibility of heresy, reinforcing the policing effect of vilification. A publication from the SAMHSA (1997), for example, sounds a cautionary note with the following: "... Practitioners of psychologically based approaches to understanding and treating batterers are acutely sensitive to the criticism that they are excusing batterers on the basis of underlying psychological problems" (p. 29). It is crucial to the conduct of valid research and the development of effective practice initiatives that we begin to ask what assumptions about "batterers" and, perhaps more importantly, about those who would seek to study them, appear to make the risk of "excusing" violent behavior so great.

Finally, the unique features of the vilification of the "batterer" may be most profoundly noticed in the suppression or marginalization of alternative policy and treatment models. An alarming example of the consequences of this vilification can be seen in the National Institute of Justice's recent *Batterer Intervention: Program Approaches and Criminal Justice Strategies* (1998). Here, an appended matrix describing state standards for "batterers" intervention contains a column titled "Prohibited Methods/Theories." These are practices and theories that various states *forbid* agencies which receive "batterer" referrals to use. The specific forbidden theories and methods vary from state to state, but include such approaches as anger management, stress management, discussions of family of origin influences, conflict resolution skills, addiction counseling, and others. Certainly any government agency describing specific types of theory — let alone intervention — as "prohibited" should be a cause for concern.

Prohibitions on thinking "outside the box" with respect to "batterer" interventions are further enforced through recent trends in domestic violence legislation, which increasingly demand coordination with established centers of domestic violence authority at community and state levels, and promote as well the increased involvement of the criminal justice system. The recent renewal and expansion of the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (H.R. 1248) reauthorizes grants "to encourage arrest policies" (Subtitle F). It also establishes the following eligibility criterion for the distribution of "Model Leadership Grants," intended to promote the development of "model strategies" with respect to domestic violence intervention in underserved populations:

The Secretary shall deny any application that fails to provide documentation, including memoranda of understanding, of the specific involvement of the State or tribal domestic violence coalition and other knowledgeable individuals and interested organizations, in the development of the State or tribe's application. (S 123 (i)(3))

For those underserved individuals who might genuinely benefit from the funding of innovative domestic violence programs tailored to their specific needs, such legislative and policy formulations are problematic. Particularly for those who have been historically marginalized and discriminated against in American society — those most likely to fall into the category “underserved” — the forces of law and order have not necessarily been experienced as either benign or helpful. Where “coordination of services” may tend to result in differential and discriminatory application of social control measures rather than safety and respect for all involved, domestic violence programs run the risk of alienating many of those they purport to serve. In an analysis of domestic violence in African American families, for example, Jackson-Gilfort, Mitrani, and Szapocznik (2000) point out that measures taken to be standard in many domestic violence programs — mandated involvement of the police, for example, or use of terminology that stresses the adversarial (e.g., “victims” vs. “batterers”) — may in fact alienate those who have been given little reason to trust mainstream mechanisms. They further note, “Clinical reports suggest that African American women are less likely to report incidents of abuse in an effort to protect their partners from a system which they perceive as racist or unfair.”

Similarly, if eligibility for funding requires adherence to increasingly standardized programming, and if that programming incorporates elements of vilification towards those designated as “batterers,” then those clients for whom such an approach does not work will avoid such services. Istar (1996), for example, argues against routine prescription for the dissolution of abusive relationships in the case of lesbian couples, maintaining that for many such couples this approach is ineffective. She goes on to explain that, while these relationships may be severely troubled, they are nonetheless valued as a familiar source of provisional support in negotiating what may be perceived as an even more hostile environment outside that of the immediate family — as such, these couples are likely to forgo intervention rather than risk losing their relationships.

In a sense, the failure of current treatment modalities for “batterers” sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy. In spite of modest program effects as documented by Gondolf (1999), it is not clear whether standard intervention works, or whether such outcomes are attributable to the law enforcement measures (e.g., probation), so often deployed in conjunction with “batterer” intervention programs. Significant numbers of “batterers” do not in fact get better, and consequently those looking to blame can claim, with some legitimacy, that nothing works with such resistant and unregenerate clients. Poor program outcomes are seen as the fault of the clients, not as a result of flaws in program theory or implementation. This view is then carried over as scientific “truth” into the culture at large through a variety of mechanisms, often with vague claims as to what “the evidence” shows, in turn seeding more pessimism and cynicism where perpetrators are concerned.

The indiscriminate expression of such opinions and generalizations, however, does little to advance an accurate and useful picture of the complex dimensions of a real social problem for which effective solutions have not yet been worked out. Furthermore, this focus on the more extreme phenomena of domestic violence may play out in unintended ways, impacting not only on those who perpetrate, but on those who are victimized as well. Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, and Winstok (2000) point out that many women who choose to stay with an abusive

partner are pathologized within human service delivery systems. Schechter (1996) notes that, in terms of maintaining custody of their children, many women in abusive relationships must answer to the conflicting expectations and demands of a myriad of helpers (child protective services, family preservation programs, and shelter systems) in negotiating safety and autonomy for themselves and their families.

Similarly, in a recent study of domestic violence screening of patients by physicians in California, screening which, according to policy, is considered a standard of care, it was found that significant numbers of doctors are not in fact doing the screening at all. Part of the problem appears to be that physicians find it difficult to screen for something for which they believe there is no effective remedy (Rodriguez, Bauer, McLoughlin, & Grumbach, 1999). As Cole (1999) points out, contributing to this reluctance to screen is the fact that, “there is no consensus yet on appropriate performance indicators for the management of domestic violence” (p. 3; see also Edleson, 1996; Murphy & O’Leary, 1994, for discussion of the difficulties involved in establishing outcome criteria for domestic violence programs). Generalized claims as to the failure of all standard interventions where perpetrators are concerned will hardly help to motivate these physicians to screen for domestic violence, a protective measure which women’s rights advocates worked long and hard to put into place.

While there is only modest support in the literature for present methods of treatment, at the same time there is little hard evidence that “prohibited methods” in fact do *not* work. Indeed, there is some evidence as to the efficacy of alternative and/or prohibited methods. Lee, Greene, and Rheinscheld (1999), for example, report some success with solution-focused group treatment, an approach specifically structured in terms of content and approach so as not to replicate those situations of shame and abuse that significant numbers of male abusers have experienced in their families of origin. Byrne (1996) argues for the efficacy of clinical models that combine individual psychotherapeutic and psychoeducational approaches with group treatment, again taking care to avoid counterproductive replication of the shame experience. O’Farrell et al. (1999) report that a conjoint behavioral marital therapy alcoholism treatment program significantly decreased domestic violence in the 2 years posttreatment studied; further, recurrence of violence correlated strongly with a return to drinking by those who did recidivate. Saunders (1996) found that perpetrators categorized as having “dependent” personality traits demonstrated better outcomes if placed in process-psychodynamic intervention groups, while those categorized as having “antisocial” traits appeared to do better after participating in more highly structured, feminist cognitive–behavioral groups.

Conjoint couple’s counseling remains the most controversial area in terms of intervention, mainly because of concerns that the safety of a nonviolent partner will be compromised by his or her continued interaction with a perpetrator. In addition, issues of attribution of blame for the violence, potential for manipulation of the therapeutic situation by “batterers,” and the risk of excusing vs. punishing violent behavior have also been controversial with respect to couple’s therapy. Nonetheless, numerous clinicians over the years have in fact reported success with couple’s counseling (see, for example, Goldner, 1992; Lipchik, 1991; O’Farrell et al., 1999; Weidman, 1986; Wylie, 1996). There is general consensus that, with close attention to process and the establishment of clear rules for engagement predicated on maintaining the safety of all concerned, couple’s therapy can be effective for the significant number of couples

who remain together while trying to achieve substantive change (Eisikovits & Edleson, 1989; Erickson, 1992; Istar, 1996; Jackson-Gilfort et al., 2000; Peled et al., 2000; Shamai, 1996).

In terms of intervention with “batterers” overall, Edleson (1996) notes that several issues resurface repeatedly in the literature on “batterer” intervention that have yet to be sufficiently examined or addressed. These include how best to match types of programs with subtypes of perpetrators; the function of power and control in program design, given their potential impact both on the client’s motivation to change and on staff efforts to model nonviolent behaviors as viable alternatives to force; and finally, repeated observation of what appears to be a strong link for perpetrators between a fear of abandonment and the use of violence. In addition, Gondolf (1999) notes that participation in a longer, more comprehensive program appeared to result in a significant reduction in rates of severe, repeated assault by those who did later recidivate, as compared to those who had experienced shorter and less comprehensive forms of intervention. Finally, Eisikovits and Edleson (1989) have suggested that there should be an emphasis on *process* when evaluating domestic violence intervention programs, so that outcome can be assessed in terms of the efficacy of specific dimensions and components of the intervention.

5. Rethinking redemption: efficacy as advocacy

Although mounting empirical evidence continues to demonstrate a more complex pattern of etiology and concomitance with respect to violent behaviors, development or application of more precise explanatory theories of domestic violence, which might better integrate and systematize these findings, lags far behind (Dutton, 1999; Eisikovits & Edleson, 1989). To summarize, vilification of the “batterer” negatively impacts domestic violence scholarship, policy, and interventions in the following ways:

1. It inhibits development of stronger causal theories of domestic violence.
2. It discourages inquiry based upon disciplines, models, or theories that are less than consonant with the established ideological/conceptual frame.
3. It creates a barrier between empirical findings and program development.
4. It provides ideological support for government control of treatment protocols.
5. It supports or mandates “batterer” interventions for which there is little empirical evidence as to efficacy.
6. It undermines, or prohibits outright, “batterer” interventions for which there is little empirical evidence as to *lack* of efficacy in terms of significant behavior change.
7. It presents as “expert” a prejudiced and stigmatizing view of “batterers,” which those working in a variety of human service settings then incorporate into their own policy and practice planning as “scientific” fact.

The vilification of the “batterer” is not a theoretical position; it is a rhetorical one. It is an expressed or implied ideological obligation to view perpetrators of domestic violence with suspicion, and as deserving of degrading characterizations. This general obligation to

disparage plays an important role in maintaining control of the definition of the problem. It reinforces a closed system of interpretation and logic. As long as scholars, policy developers, and practitioners are required or obligated to hold (or at least repeat) these views, efforts to improve our understanding and practice will be inextricably bound up in the need — the imperative — to blame. Again, how we view perpetrators of domestic violence may be the single most important factor in determining our policies towards them.

Some refute the use of the term “treatment” for work with domestic violence perpetrators, preferring to describe it as an educational component of a larger community-change response to patriarchy-sanctioned violence. This reinforces the unworthiness of “batterers” to receive treatment, and diverts attention from ineffective programs. Whatever it is called, the failure of conventional domestic violence intervention to effect substantive behavioral change remains. A model of treatment with no consistent evidence for effectiveness has become mandated in many states as the only acceptable form of treatment. Simply at the level of the cost-beneficial investment of tax dollars, this should be unacceptable.

In the broad context of national social welfare policy, it may not be timely to pose these issues. Managed care, welfare reform, and an increased emphasis on punishment in criminal justice all clearly point toward diminished interest in compassionate, more complex, longer-term behavioral and personal change strategies. However, if we are serious about addressing issues of violence in our society, we must be willing to tolerate the anxiety of *not* rejecting those who we find most frightening or abhorrent. In rejecting others, we fail to learn from them, and we perpetuate patterns of conflict and of dominance.

O’Dea (2000–2001) refers to this difficult task of *not* rejecting as “climbing the Everest within,” the development of an ability to, “move from the usual crusading efforts to collaborative alliances and . . . attempts to humanize rather than demonize that which is opposed . . . becoming aware that what we choose not to do is often as powerful as what we choose to do” (p. 23).

Consciously choosing *not* to participate in the vilification of domestic violence perpetrators is a difficult path to take, given current trends within the field. Though difficult, it is the right and kind thing to do, and may get us further up the mountain in the end, bringing us that much closer to a fuller understanding of phenomena of domestic violence, and to the development of effective intervention and prevention strategies. Such efficacy would be the best possible advocacy for those currently struggling to raise their children, maintain their jobs, and preserve their emotional and spiritual integrity in spite of the hurtful and violent behaviors of those they are trying, or have tried, to love.

Appendix A. Selected attributions and characterizations of “batterers”

Fawcett, B. et al. (Eds.) (1996). *Violence and Gender Relations*, London: Sage:

While violence from both known men and strangers can be described as behaviors designed to control, dominate, and express authority and power. . . . With known men, a combination of forms of abuse is *always* (italics added) present. . . . Food can be restricted

so that women fear starvation and death. . . . Known men may demand and achieve, through physical violence, complete obedience to every order. . . . Humiliation is an important strategy in obedience training. (pp. 8–9)

Hart, B. (1999), citing from: Batterer Intervention Services (1991). *Accountability: Program Standards for Batterer Intervention Services*. Harrisburg, PA: PCADV, in “Recidivism Prediction and Parole Decisions” (Minnesota Center Against Violence and Abuse at <http://www.mincava.umn.edu/hart/recidiv.htm>):

Men who batter their wives do not do so by accident, mistake, or as a result of loss of control. Domestic battery is intentional violence directed at women partners in order to gain or maintain control over them. It is systemic and repetitious. It creates an atmosphere of extreme terror.

From “Philosophy,” Alternatives to Domestic Aggression (“Batterers” service agency, Ann Arbor, 1999) at <http://comnet.org/adacss/philosophy.html>:

Battering is NEVER . . . provoked, hereditary, out of control, accidental, or an isolated incident with no further dynamics. Battering is not caused by disease, diminished intellect, alcoholism/addiction or intoxication, mental illness, or any external person or event.

Domestic violence is a means for men to systematically dominate, control, devalue, and disempower women.

Battering/violence is greater than an individual act; it supports the larger goal of the oppression of women.

Men batter because they can and it serves as a means to an end. Our culture encourages, supports, condones, entitles, and expects men to dominate and control women.

Battering and abusive behavior is regulated by the batterer’s estimation of probable consequences

Quote from a health care worker presenting a segment on domestic violence screening during a training on pre- and post-HIV test counseling (Presentation by the [Broome County Health Department, Ithaca, NY, 2001](#)):

It’s all about power and control. . . . Batterers are skilled at manipulating helpers who try to intervene. . . .

From an article in a recent NASW New York State Chapter newsletter authored by the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Frohman, S. and Grossman, B. (2001, January). Domestic Violence: Identifying Victims. *NASW New York State Chapter Update*, 25 (5), 5:

Couple counseling and family therapy are dangerous and send the false message that the victim is partially responsible for the abuse and has control over the abuse. . . . Social

workers should also be aware of the dangers of intervention programs for batterers that use treatment models. The perpetration of violence in an intimate relationship is not a mental health issue. Abusers choose to use abusive tactics to maintain power and control over their partners. Batterers have the ability to choose to end this behavior. Abusers often use their attendance to (sic) Batterer Intervention Programs (BIP) and mental health counseling as a way of convincing their partners to stay with them or to return if they have already left.

National Institute of Justice (1998). *Batterer Intervention: Program Approaches and Criminal Justice Strategies*. NIJ, Washington, quoting “batterer” treatment providers:

Let’s start with the word *treatment*. We do not see our work as therapy. Battering is the natural outgrowth of patriarchal values. . . . (p. 17)

The director of AMEND noted how often batterers *might* (italics added) admit during this stage, “The funny thing is, I wasn’t even that mad. I just wanted to show her who’s boss.” (p. 52)

From a training manual, *HIV Testing Procedures, vol. II*, NYSDOH AIDS Institute, “Domestic Violence Screening,” (Module 8), p. 24:

Finally, batterers’ terrorist tactics can so destroy some victims that suicide seems like the only option.

Personal correspondence from Ohio social service agency (anonymity requested) concerning certifying site visit (1999):

When informed that several “batterers” had severe depressive symptoms and one had recently committed suicide, an Ohio Domestic Violence Network (Ohio certifying agency) official responded, “I’m surprised that occurred. I didn’t think that they (‘batterers’) could have those kind of feelings.”

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