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GOING BEYOND GENDER-SPECIFIC TREATMENTS IN WIFE BATTERING: PRO-FEMINIST COUPLE AND FAMILY THERAPY

Barry Trute

McGill University

ABSTRACT. *There has been lingering debate as to whether couple and family treatments should be employed in situations of conjugal violence. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the theoretical and clinical issues at the center of this controversy, and to offer an argument for the sequential use of relationship therapies as a "second phase" to follow gender-specific individual and group treatments of perpetrators of violence and their partners. Basic elements of pro-feminist couple and family treatment are described. Key intake questions, as a prelude to marital and family treatment, are suggested to assess the appropriateness of relationship therapies and to protect victim safety. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd*

TWENTY YEARS ago, little attention was given to wife battering in community mental health services. Domestic violence was seen to rarely occur in what was believed to be highly unusual family circumstances. Most human service professionals were blind to its high prevalence, to its occurrence in homes across income levels and cultural groupings, and to its serious social and psychological consequences. We did not know how to ask the right questions to detect domestic violence, let alone understand how to deter or treat it.

Over the past several decades there has been a marked expansion of understanding and some convergence of clinical and scientific opinion regarding domestic violence. The knowledge generated has been rich in content, yet still remains somewhat fragmented. There have been persistent differences of view regarding the management and treatment of domestic violence, particularly across professional disciplines and service sectors. In these early years of research and theory building, several ideological clusters have emerged with differing views as to the causes and cures of domestic violence (Gelles & Loseke, 1993).

The feminist perspective has been the most persuasive. The feminist movement was instrumental in raising public and professional awareness of the seriousness and frequency of wife abuse. The substantial contribution of this movement has been both practical and

Correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Barry Trute, Fisher Chair and Professor, School of Social Work, McGill University, Montreal, Québec, Canada.

political. In a practical sense, feminists led the way in building supportive networks for battered women, which included shelters, resource centers, and advocacy groups. They identified wife battering as a political issue in that it is rooted in a societal belief system that promotes patriarchy and endorses the dominance of men over women. Domestic violence was recognized as a means to enforce the control and suppression of women. The first priority of the feminist movement has been the liberation and protection of women. The interventions that directly emerged from their efforts had this focus, and sought to provide places of refuge for women suffering abuse. Further, they mobilized social and psychological resources to facilitate the liberation and healing of women. Their strong advocacy position, taken in defense of women and in the promotion of women's concerns, has importantly challenged traditional mental health services. Perpetrators of family violence are now more clearly seen as committing criminal acts and are not assumed to be mentally disturbed. Families are now more pragmatically recognized as being "hazardous workplace sites" for many women rather than providing "havens of safety and intimacy".

A sociological perspective has also contributed importantly to the ongoing debate as to the cause and course of domestic violence. Central to this perspective is the contention that social structures (such as sex, age, income, ethnicity, etc.) affect individual behavior and family life. Attributes of the family as a social group are studied; a social group that is recognized as a "violence-prone institution". The importance of feminist theory, with its gendered view of social relations is respected within this perspective, but is criticized as being too narrow and restricted in focus in the use of patriarchy as the "single prevailing variable" to explain wife abuse (Gelles, 1993). Based on their findings in large-scale community surveys, family sociologists have come to a contentious conclusion: that women initiate relationship violence at rates similar to men. This is explained by sociological concepts of "resource acquisition" and "power dominance", as aspects of exchange-social control theory in which violence is seen as a "conflict tactic" used by both men and women in response to what are conflicts of interest in a relationship (Gelles, 1983; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). This finding has been qualified by the recognition that men are the predominant perpetrators of severe assaults causing injury (Gelles & Straus, 1989; Straus & Gelles, 1988) and that women most often use violence in their own defense (Straus, 1980; Straus & Gelles, 1988). An overarching sociological model depicts violence in families as being promoted and perpetuated by societal norms and standards. This perspective calls for social and political action to prevent family violence through eliminating violent societal norms and violence-provoking community circumstances. Social values need to be challenged, which legitimize and glorify the use of physical force, and perpetuate sexist beliefs. Community circumstances that fuel rage and violence, such as poverty, racial oppression, and unemployment, are seen as requiring direct remediation. As do the feminists, the sociological theorists identify domestic violence as a societal issue that is as much a political as it is a behavioral concern.

A basic distinction in cases of domestic violence has been recently suggested (Johnson, 1995), which differentiates "patriarchal terrorism" and "common couple violence". This dichotomous classification does explain the marked differences of the views that have persisted between feminist and sociological researchers. Feminist researchers have largely drawn their study subjects from shelters, hospitals, and the police. They see situations that are marked by powerful male dominance and more severe levels of abuse. Further, these tend to be situations that are pervaded by frequent bouts of attack and terror. Sociological researchers have preferred to use randomly selected households in cross-sectional community surveys. This approach has generated couple situations in which there appears to be equivalent frequencies of male and female violence, in which violence does not seem to steadily escalate, and in which there is a predominance of mild and moderate levels of physical abuse.

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