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Beyond individual and visible acts of violence: A framework to examine the lives of women in low-income neighborhoods

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SYNOPSIS

Low-income minority women are among the most disadvantaged in terms of social location, which exposes them to various forms of violence that perpetuate their poverty. Previous research has focused on individual explanations of actions that affect them. We seek to redirect our understandings away from individual explanations to focus on the broader contexts and inequalities that lie at the root of multiple and interconnected forms of violence in the lives of women in vulnerable positions. This approach facilitates recognition of violent structures often unrecognized or misrecognized as such. Our framework includes structural, interpersonal, and symbolic forms of violence, which we apply to examine the lives of a subsample of minority-status women gathered ethnographically in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Los Angeles and New York through the Three City Study of Moving to Opportunity. In this exercise, we highlight the broader contexts that create conditions for individuals to harm one another.

Introduction

Low-income minority women living in poor neighborhoods experience multiple disadvantages in terms of class, race and gender in ways that perpetuate their poverty and social vulnerability. Most of the literature that documents their lives focuses primarily on individual or other proximate determinants of their situation, such as the violence occurring among males as well as domestic and other gender-based violence (Anderson, 2008; Sampson, 1987). Further, most of the research on sexual and gender-based violence highlights immediate factors, often not neighborhood-specific (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Lundgren, 1998).[1] Thus, this research tends to focus on individual acts of willful intention to cause harm (see Jackman, 2002), focusing on the characteristics of perpetrators and the interactional patterns that lead to violence.

Indeed, Randall Collins (2008) notes that the way we have understood and studied violence has largely been guided by how data are collected — by examining individuals and their actions. While a focus on individuals is useful in identifying immediate determinants of acts of violence, it does not help to detect patterns embedded in structural systems, which Feldman (1991) describes as formations of violence, or to understand how patterns of violence are connected to larger structures. Furthermore, by focusing on individual characteristics, research on violence in poor neighborhoods shifts the focus away from structural factors and inequalities that create the context within which violent acts in various forms take place (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Johnson, Palmieri, Jackson, & Hobfoll, 2007).

Taking the work on individual factors as a point of departure, we advance a perspective that focuses on the structural roots of violence in the lives of women. We do not locate our work directly within the scholarship on domestic violence or on individual's victimization because the forms of violence we seek to unveil are normally not recognized as such (and not "counted" as violence) and indeed go misrecognized in the "order of things" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004).

We focus on providing another angle, anchored in structures and extrapersonal factors, from which to examine and understand *violence in women's lives*—both in visible expressions, such as physical violence, as well as in less visible manifestations, such as the injuries that come from profound structural inequalities. More specifically, this article is not

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about violence against women or based on this scholarship; rather, we focus on how different forms of violence in the lives of women are tied together. To achieve this, we make use of a framework that includes structural, interpersonal, and symbolic forms of violence initially developed to examine violence in the lives of Guatemalan women (see Menjívar, 2011). This framework in some ways parallels the intersectionality approach (Crenshaw, 1989a,b), a particularly useful tool to examine the lives of women who face multiple layers of discrimination and exclusion in a context of multidimensional power structures. Proponents of intersectionality (see Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989a,b) argue that different systems of stratification and oppression, such as race, class, and gender shape and are shaped by one another in a "matrix of domination" (Collins, 2000: 42) and their effects cannot be analyzed separately. In a similar vein, Critical Race theorists like Derrick Bell and Patricia Williams point out that race alone cannot account for disempowerment. Instead, factors like race, class, gender, national origin and sexual orientation are all parts of the multidimensionality of oppression. Our approach parallels these conceptualizations in that we also argue that different forms of oppression are intertwined and cannot be analyzed separately, but instead of integrating race, class, gender, and national origin, we locate the sources of suffering in extrapersonal factors and thus bring together structural violence, symbolic, and interpersonal forms of violence. The violent effects of the accumulation of multiple forms of deprivation and devaluation of personhood can be found in poor areas of the global South as well as in inner-cities of the north. Thus, using a framework developed to unveil multi-sided and interconnected, often hidden, forms of violence in the lives of women who live in a different social and geographic contexts, and who on the surface may seem to have little in common, we highlight the structural roots of vulnerabilities and suffering manifested in context-specific ways in the lives of vulnerable women in the most disadvantaged social locations in their respective societies. We follow feminist legal scholars like Schneider (1992: 568) who call us to hold on to both particularity (the particular experiences of women who have had relationships with battering men) and generality (violence and power and control, reasonableness and the larger struggle of women in the world) simultaneously. In this light, our work is relevant to theorizing the conditions in which vulnerable women live around the world today.[2] Thus, we "extend" a framework used in another case and context, following closely Snow, Morrill, and Anderson's (2003: 187) proposals for theorizing based on ethnographic work. Accordingly, our use of this framework involves the "transferability" of theory to a different context (2003: 187), shifting attention from factual novelties and the peculiarity of actual events to trans-situational patterns; from the concrete, to the search for formal patterns across a multiplicity of situations or contexts (Zerubavel, 1980). Therefore, as Snow et al. (2003: 189) note, "although the specific contents of the actions observed are different, their social forms are quite similar," and it is through extension that we can advance theory based on ethnographic work.

Thus, we extend this framework to data obtained ethnographically among low-income minority women participating in the Three City Study of Moving to Opportunity conducted in Boston, New York, and Los Angeles. We argue that analytical attention should begin with the context in which multiple, layered forms of violence coalesce, setting the conditions within which individuals hurt one another and social relations are distorted, an approach that has been used to study violence in other US urban contexts (see Bourgois, 2004a,b). Although this framework gives primacy to broader contextual factors, we recognize the importance of individual and intermediate level factors because the broader context shapes these other proximate determinants and thus they are all intimately related. Shifting attention away from individual acts to the broader context may lead to a reframing of how we understand violence in the lives of women (and men).

We briefly consider the literature on violence in low-income neighborhoods pertaining to youth violence and household or home-based violence, the two areas related to violence in poor neighborhoods that have garnered significant scholarly attention. We then present our analytical framework to highlight how our approach differs from work that has been done in this area, and end this section with a discussion on how these types of violence are gendered. We then review the data we use and our methodological approach before we turn to our empirical sections, where we present cases of structural, interpersonal and symbolic violence. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of using this framework to examine violence in the lives of women in US contexts.

Violence in high poverty neighborhoods

A review of the literature linking neighborhood disadvantage to violence reveals a focus on youth-related violence, but less attention to sexual and gender-based violence even though both are quite common in poor neighborhoods. Miller's (2008) research in a historically African-American high poverty neighborhood in St. Louis demonstrates how sexual and gender-based violence are normalized and become normative. Nevertheless, it is the high rates of violence associated with crime in poor neighborhoods that have attracted more attention and have led to important explanations of violence that go beyond individual acts. For instance, Devine (1996a, 1996b) posits that schools in inner-cities contribute to the development of a "culture of violence" by increasing the militarized and prison-like security dynamics in inner-cities. In the same vein, youths in deprived [3] neighborhoods who are exposed to high levels of violence tend to develop cognitive frames that normalize violence. And Gilligan (1996) theorizes that experiences of humiliations, particularly for those in disadvantaged social locations, breed violence. Other scholars focus on social networks as possible explanations for violence in deprived communities (Haynie, Silver, & Teasdale, 2006; Kreager, 2007), as negative peer relations can provide harmful social modeling, which reinforces the use of violence to achieve objectives (Collins & Pancoast, 1976a,b). While this scholarship focuses primarily on individuals' immediate social worlds, many of these studies do acknowledge the broader structure in shaping individuals' acts of violence (Anderson, 2008; Gilligan, 1996; Kramer, 2000).

As in the case of youth violence, studies on domestic violence generally use individual-level approaches to examine this type of violence; thus, several variables have been examined, such as witnessing violence while growing up (Martin et al., 2002; Osofsky, 1995); difficulties controlling anger (Feldman & Ridley, 1995; Follingstad, Bradley, Laughlin, & Burke,