



Sharpening Ockham's Razor: The role of psychopathology and neuropsychopathology in the perpetration of domestic violence

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ABSTRACT

Current major explanatory theoretical views of domestic violence perpetration can be summarized as feminist/socio-cultural, social learning theory-based intergenerational transmission, and psychological/psychosocial. Of those, psychological/psychosocial views offer the most parsimonious and thorough explanations, while feminist/socio-cultural theory relies on the metaphysical usage of the construct “patriarchy” and miniscule empirical support, and research guided by intergenerational transmission suffers from small effect sizes. This review summarizes these theoretical perspectives and evaluates them according to epistemological criteria of parsimony, elegance, and empirical utility. A more in-depth review examines empirical links between psychological and neuropsychological disorders and domestic violence perpetration. This effort at theory-building advances the premise that domestic violence perpetration is better and more accurately understood as maladaptive coping, symptomatic of a range of psychological and neuropsychological disorders than as either a culturally supported strategy for male domination of women or as only learned behavior.

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“We are to admit no more causes of natural things than such as are both true and sufficient to explain their appearances...”

Isaac Newton — *Principia Mathematica*

1. Introduction

Baker (2011), in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, asserts that the principle of Ockham's Razor (other things being equal, simpler

theories are better) is often used to counter metaphysical formulations which involve superfluous ontological explanations. What then might be the epistemological role of Ockham's Razor in bettering our understanding of domestic violence? Most current explanatory theoretical views can be summarized as feminist/socio-cultural, intergenerational transmission, and psychological/psychosocial (Corvo & deLara, 2010). In the feminist/socio-cultural view, domestic violence is solely the product of “patriarchy”. The meaning of the construct “patriarchy” is often ambiguous and imprecisely defined: sometimes as an amorphous quality of cultures; sometimes as an inventory of socio-economic inequalities between men and women; sometimes as the attitudes and beliefs of individuals or rules of institutions (Dutton & Corvo, 2006). Often it is not defined at all and is used more as an indictment

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than a variable or concept. This central causal construct, “patriarchy”, functions primarily as a metaphysical explanation for domestic violence. The meaning of “metaphysical” here is in its current common advanced usage: “[metaphysics] seek(s) to explain inherent or universal elements of reality which are not easily discovered or experienced in our everyday life. As such, it is concerned with explaining the features of reality that exist beyond the physical world and our immediate senses. Metaphysics, therefore, uses a logic based on the meaning of human terms, rather than on a logic tied to human sense perception of the objective world.” (PBS, [online glossary](#), n.d.). As a metaphysical explanation, “patriarchy” is not bound by the epistemological requirements that apply to empirical explanatory systems. Theories and even ideologies carry a burden for empirical verification (e.g. interrelationships among observable and measureable facts) that metaphysics can avoid. Pursuing theoretical elegance and parsimony in the face of metaphysical explanations based on the concept of “patriarchy” would seem to involve simply documenting, ignoring, or disconfirming non-empirical articulations of causality but this has been done exhaustively in the recent academic literature with little effect on contemporary policy or practice (e.g. Corvo, 2012; Dutton & Corvo, 2006). A partial explanation for the persistent acceptance of “patriarchy” as the cause for domestic violence stems from its metaphysical exemption from requirements for empirical evidentiary validation.

Intergenerational transmission as an explanatory theory presents a different and less fraught challenge to theory-building in that its limitations are not due to metaphysical obscurantism but simply to modest effect sizes. Unlike the metaphysical dimensions of “patriarchy”, intergenerational transmission is fully compatible with the empirical testing of theory.

If we situate our efforts to condense explanations of domestic violence to their parsimonious essentials in one of the customary multi-theoretical frameworks of social and behavioral science (e.g., ecological or biopsychosocial), then it is possible to examine the relative explanatory power of theories across ecological space and/or developmental time. Psychological and neuropsychological risk factors for domestic violence are here posited to conform most to theoretical parsimony as they are most proximal to behavior, have the strongest statistical associations, and are the clearest and easiest to define both conceptually and operationally (e.g., compare the measurement of current levels of depression to retrospective reports of family of origin violence exposure). Psychological and neuropsychological variables are also easily entered into ecological and biopsychosocial models to test comparative strengths of association with other proximal and temporally and spatially distal variables. However, to be relevant, whatever distal effects are transmitted to individuals from socio-cultural instruction (either directly or through subtle atmospherics) or via family of origin violence exposure, must be actually present in contemporary psychometric dimensions of pathology or other factors related to violent behavior. Following a more detailed overview of the current theoretical perspectives on domestic violence, a synthetic review of psychological and neuropsychological risk factors in perpetration will be presented to gauge their comparative epistemological utility in developing theoretical elegance.

2. Overview of theoretical perspectives

2.1. Feminist socio-cultural perspective

The feminist/socio-cultural theory asserts that domestic violence is aggression toward women only, is solely the product of the socially sanctioned domination and control of women by men, and that violence is used as a form of “power and control” (Corvo & Johnson, 2003). Although most national policies and the “batterer” treatment standards of most states are premised upon domestic violence being the product of “patriarchy”, the central causal construct in feminist/socio-cultural theory, there is little empirical evidence in support of this view. Empirical studies examining the influence of patriarchal

gender roles or gender-based power inequities on domestic violence have not found strong correlations between those factors (Corvo & Johnson, 2010; Dutton, 1994; Sugarman & Frankel, 1996; Yick, 2000). In a macro-level study of domestic violence, women's status variables generated by feminist/socio-cultural theory were only weakly correlated with state rates of domestic violence in comparison to socio-economic influences (poverty, unemployment) (Corvo & Johnson, 2010). Numerous empirical studies refute the feminist/socio-cultural view: less than 10% of U.S. couples are male dominant (Coleman & Straus, 1986); women are more likely to use severe violence against non-violent men than the reverse (Stets & Straus, 1992); Canadian and American men do not view violence against their wives as acceptable (Dutton, 1994; Simon et al., 2001); and levels of abusiveness in lesbian relationships are comparable to those in heterosexual relationships (Alexander, 2002), if not higher (see Lie, Schilit, Bush, Montague, & Reyes, 1991). Western societies are more accepting of female violence toward male partners than that of males toward female partners (Dixon & Graham-Kevan, 2011). A study by Douglas and Straus (2006) of dating violence in 19 countries representing a wide range of gender roles, found almost universally that more women than men assault their partners, a finding consistent with more than 100 other studies. In a review of 91 empirical studies, Straus (2011) found similar rates of perpetration of severe domestic violence for males and females. Finally, Archer's (2000) meta-analysis of domestic violence studies, with a combined *n* of 60,000, found women, especially younger women, to be more domestically violent than men.

2.2. Intergenerational transmission

The intergenerational transmission of domestic violence is a long-standing theoretical concept and often-noted influence on domestic violence in adulthood. Research conducted on the intergenerational transmission of domestic violence is primarily framed by social learning theory. The social learning theory-based intergenerational transmission model of domestic violence posits that exposure to, or observation of, violence in the family of origin creates beliefs, ideas and norms about the appropriateness of aggression. This is a narrower view than developmental psychopathology theories which identify a broader range of developmental, psychosocial, or family of origin risks. Earlier studies of domestic violence found a high frequency of violence in the families of origin of domestically violent men (Gayford, 1975; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981; Roy, 1977; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Other early studies (Carroll, 1980; Gelles, 1974) found associations between child abuse in the family of origin and adult domestic violence perpetration. Kalmus (1984) found that both exposure to child abuse and observation of inter-parental spousal violence contributed to the probability of partner aggression for both men and women.

Although consistently statistically significant across studies, the effect size of social learning-derived intergenerational transmission variables in predicting domestic violence in adulthood is often modest. Stith et al.'s (2000) meta-analysis found overall effect sizes for intergenerational transmission of domestic violence perpetration of $r = .18$. In their review of the literature, Holtzworth-Munroe, Bates, Smutzler, and Sandin (1997) concluded that the correlations found between family of origin violence and current partner violence were weak and likely mediated by other variables. In their comprehensive review for the recent Partner Abuse State of Knowledge Project, Capaldi, Knoble, Shortt, and Kim (2012) stated, “Exposure to violence between parents in the family of origin and experience of child abuse are still much researched risk factors that show evidence of low to moderate risk for IPV and of mediation by more proximal factors such as antisocial behavior and adult adjustment.” (p. 2).

As mediating variables beyond the observation-incorporation-enactment chain of learned behavior are added, understanding

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