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Feminist contributions to understanding woman abuse: Myths, controversies, and realities

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ABSTRACT

Woman abuse in intimate heterosexual relationships takes different shapes and forms and is a worldwide public health problem. Many journalists, activists, and researchers, however, minimize the extent of woman abuse, sharply criticize feminist empirical, theoretical, and policy work on this issue, and disseminate myths about feminism. A key objective of this paper is to challenge these myths and respond to criticisms of feminist scholarship. Another goal is to show that some feminists use quantitative methods and that feminist techniques influence some types of conventional research, such as large-scale surveys conducted in Canada and the United States.

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1. Introduction

> *How and why violence is understood to occur underpins the directions taken by policy makers, service providers, and community activists to intervene and prevent male violence against women. Theories also play a critical role for suggesting new directions for research* (Johnson & Dawson, 2011, p. 13).

Today, with so many television programs, newspaper articles, university courses, social scientific studies, and public awareness campaigns focusing on "intimate intrusions" (Stanko, 1985), it is hard to imagine that less than 40 years ago, male-to-female assaults behind closed doors were invisible and unacknowledged. Even family therapists, academics, and scholarly journals did not recognize gendered violence. Consider the highly respected and widely read *Journal of Marriage and Family*. From its beginnings in 1939 through to 1969, this periodical contained no articles on wife abuse (O'Brien, 1971). In fact, a review of all editions of this journal published from 1939 to 1969, did not find a single article with the word "violence" in the title. The articles that did speak of relationships in which there was violence referred only to conflicts within marriage. The authors of these articles portrayed such "conflict" as normal and even healthy, and ignored the danger that could result from it. Interventions in these cases were aimed at the preservation of the family, never at protection or support for the woman who was abused. In sum, woman abuse was ignored or downplayed (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997).

Now, there is plenty of quantitative evidence showing that woman abuse is a worldwide public health problem (Guggisberg, 2010; Shoener, 2008). For example, the World Health Organization conducted a multi-country study of the health effects of domestic violence. Over 24,000 women who resided in urban and rural parts of 10 countries were interviewed and the research team found that the percentage of women who were ever physically or sexually assaulted (or both) by an intimate partner ranged from 15 to 71%, with most research sites ranging between 29 and 62% (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005).

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Another major international study – the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS) – interviewed 23,000 women in 11 countries. The percentage of women who revealed at least one incident of physical or sexual violence by any man since the age of 16 ranged from one-in-five in Hong Kong to between 50 and 60% in Australia, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Denmark, and Mozambique (Johnson, Ollus, & Nevala, 2008). Furthermore, in Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa, and in the U.S., 40 to 70% of female homicide victims are murdered by their current or former partners (DeKeseredy, 2011a; Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, et al., 2002). Another disturbing truth is that 14 girls and women are killed each day in Mexico (Mujica & Ayala, 2008). There are other types of woman abuse that do not receive much social scientific attention in North America, such as honor killings and dowry-related violence (Aronson Fontes & McCloskey, 2011). These, too, are not rare crimes. Note that annually, approximately 5,000 women and girls lose their lives to honor killings around the world (Proudfoot, 2009).

Following Mills (1959), numerous sociologists, especially those who are feminists, argue that there is something about broader structural and cultural forces, such as patriarchy, that allows for so very many women to be victimized. In North America, scores of researchers, practitioners, and activists agree that when we begin to look that the 11% or so of women in marital/cohabiting relationships who are physically abused each year by their male partners (DeKeseredy, 2011a), you begin to find, as Mills (1959) states, "an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them" (p. 9).

There are prominent politicians, journalists, activists, and researchers, however, who minimize the alarming extent of woman abuse and "launch scathing critiques" of feminist interpretations of the above data (Malley-Morrison, Hamel, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010, p. 4). For example, Dutton (2010) claims that only a "minority of men are violent either outside or within relationships. There is no norm for wife assault — this is a sociological fiction and contradicted by surveys (e.g., Simon et al., 2001)" (p. 8). Moreover, in Canada, and elsewhere, there is ample evidence of an ever changing and ongoing anti-feminist backlash (DeKeseredy & Dragiewicz, 2009), as well as other "patriarchal resistance strategies" that undermine women's health, safety, and equality (Berns, 2001; Johnson & Dawson, 2011). One such episode occurred in Canada on October 3, 2006. Bev Oda, former federal Minister for the Status of Women Canada (SWC) announced that women's organizations would no longer be eligible for funding for advocacy, government lobbying, or research projects. Moreover, SWC was required to delete the word *equality* from its list of goals (Carastathis, 2006). Many more examples could be provided here that challenge Dutton's (2006) assertion that "women's rights have finally been acknowledged after centuries of religion-based political oppression" (p. ix).

Large numbers of people, including members of conservative fathers' rights groups, passionately disseminate myths about feminist empirical, theoretical, and policy work on woman abuse. A key objective of this paper, then, is to challenge these myths and respond to some widely cited criticisms of feminist scholarship. Still, the arguments presented in this article are not geared toward furthering an "us versus them" agenda. Rather, they are consistent with what several feminists define as a "rapprochement" between feminist and mainstream positivist research (Smith, 1994).[1] Thus, another goal of this paper is to show that some feminists use quantitative methods and that feminist research influences some types of conventional research, such as surveys conducted in Canada (e.g., DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Johnson, 1996). What Smith (1994) stated nearly 17 years ago still holds true today: "[T]he generally good quality of the data elicited demonstrates the value of adopting a feminist approach to data gathering within a conventional survey research framework...." (p. 124).

2. What is feminism?

In the current political atmosphere characterized by a political counter-movement to degender the naming and framing of woman abuse (Bumiller, 2008; Johnson & Dawson, 2011), feminist inquiry is subject to countless vitriolic attacks, but most, if not all, who launch them have an inadequate understanding of feminism. For example, some religious groups, academics (e.g., Dutton, 2006), fathers' rights associations, and right-wing politicians, equate feminism with hating men or view it as a movement aimed at helping women gain more power than men in political, economic, and social spheres (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996). Some feminists may fit into one or both of these categories; but, many men and women are feminists and they are united by a deep desire to produce scholarship that meets the highest disciplinary standards and to eliminate gender inequality, as well as homophobia, racism, and other means of oppression. As Renzetti (1993) points out, the goal of feminist scholars is "not to push men out so as to pull women in, but rather to gender the study" of violence against women and other social problems (p. 259).

Defining feminism is a difficult task. Yet, one thing leading experts in the field all agree with is that "feminism is not merely about adding women onto the agenda" (Currie & MacLean, 1993, p. 6). Feminism is referred to here as "a set of theories about women's oppression and a set of strategies for change" (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988, p. 502). It is, though, erroneous to view feminism as a monolithic enterprise, which is frequently done in attacks on feminist research and theories. For example, Dutton (2010) incorrectly argues that:

> The gender paradigm has, as its basis, a Marxist view of the sexes. MacKinnon (1989) began her book *Toward a Feminist Theory of State* with the claim that "sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 1). In short, all interactions between genders are reduced to power and control and are viewed from the perspective that male oppression of women is tantamount to the power of the bourgeoisie in suppressing the proletariat (p. 7).

There are Marxist feminists, but Catharine MacKinnon (cited above by Dutton) is definitely not one. She is a *radical feminist*. Radical feminists see male power and privilege as the "root cause" of all social relations, inequality, and violence against women. To radical feminists, the most important social relations in any society are based in patriarchy and all other relations, including social class, are secondary and derived from male–female relations (Beirne & Messerchmidt, 1995). On the other hand, heavily informed by the work of Karl Marx's friend and colleague Friedrich Engels (1884), Marxist feminists contend that class and gender divisions of labor determine male and female positions in any society. Even so, the gender division of labor is viewed as the product of the class division of labor (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Messerschmidt, 1986). Since women are seen as being primarily dominated by capital and secondarily by men, the main strategy for change advocated by Marxist feminists is the transformation from a capitalist to a democratic society (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Messerschmidt, 1986).

Schwendinger and Schwendinger's (1983) *Rape and Inequality*, which is rarely, if ever, discussed in conservative critiques of feminist scholarship, is a salient example of a Marxist feminist analysis of violence against women. The Schwendingers argue that rape is not common in all societies. Rather, based on their analyses of historical, cross-cultural, and anthropological data, they conclude that capitalist societies have the highest rape rates because they produce unequal gender relations that spawn increased violence. They also conclude

[1] Positivism assumes that human behavior is determined and can be measured (Curran & Renzetti, 2001).