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From dichotomy to continua: Towards a transformation of gender roles and intervention goals in partner violence

Zvi Eisikovits *, Benjamin Bailey

Center for the Study of Society, University of Haifa, Israel

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ABSTRACT

Through an examination of the major trends in the last forty years in understanding the phenomenon of partner violence (PV), we can ascertain the movement from a dichotomous analysis of gender division, wherein men are perceived as perpetrators and women as victims, towards a more interactive and mutual dynamic. While intervention lags behind empirical knowledge, this trend enhances the controversy as to whether the unit of intervention in PV should be the male or the female, the individual or the couple. The first section of this paper provides a brief review of the development of our understanding of PV and the limited incorporation of new knowledge into core intervention goals with female and male clients. The second part of the paper illustrates how gender related controversies are reflected in the roles, self perceptions and functioning of therapists in the field. This section is based on qualitative data from a series of studies performed on therapists by the authors and their students during the last ten years. The transformative gender experience is examined, showing how the successful and open self-examination of gender related issues might lead to personal and professional growth.

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1. Introduction

Historically, gender and partner violence (PV) have been intertwined as determinant components in violence between heterosexual couples (Anderson, 2005; Brush, 2005). The purpose of this paper is to review how gender based dichotomy in PV intervention is transforming towards a more complex continuum-based model, in which gender differences, subsequent roles (perpetrator/victim) and treatment goals, shift and become blurred. While PV is increasingly examined from an interactive perspective, it is worthy to follow how such understanding finds its gradual expression in intervention goals, and balances our attitudes toward both male and female clients.

To demonstrate this argument we will briefly review the history of understanding the phenomenon of PV and the way intervention goals were shaped accordingly. One way to illustrate these shifts is to examine the dilemmas of therapists who work in this field, and the ways in which the gender related complexities are reflected in their roles, self-perceptions and functioning.

The study of violence between partners has a relatively short history that does not exceed forty years and is characterized by rapid change (Whitaker & Lutzker, 2009). When delineating the major trends in the development of the understanding of the PV phenomenon, one can see a movement from a dichotomous analysis between the genders, where men are the perpetrators and women are the victims, in mutually exclusive roles (Bograd, 1988; Dobash & Dobash,

* Corresponding author at: Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Studies, Center for the Study of Society, University of Haifa, Israel. Tel.: +972 4 8240195; fax: +972 4 824 9268.
E-mail address: zvi@soc.haifa.ac.il (Z. Eisikovits).

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1979; Yllo, 1993), towards a more interactive and mutually violent dynamic (Archer, 2000; Hamel, 2009; Frieze, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Kimmel, 2002; Swan & Snow, 2006).

2. Brief historical review

The liberal social idealism of the 1960s was the original bedrock of the domestic violence movement (Pence & Shepard, 1999). It emerged from the belief in social activism, which attempted with various degrees of success to surface and solve social problems ranging from minority rights (blacks, women, children, and elderly) to the elimination of poverty — as embedded in the dream of the "Great Society". All of this served as a tailwind to the Batterers Women Movement (Schechter, 1982), led by feminists and sympathizers of feminists, who attempted to define women battering as a social problem (Loseke, 1989). The female victims discussed in this period were those of what is known today as severe physical and/or emotional violence or intimate terrorism (Johnson, 1995(. These women were either severely beaten or terrorized by fear, often running away with children, from a severely violent male partner (Anderson & Umberson, 2001). The governing etiology was based on the power/control violence equation as advocated by the feminist movement (Dobash & Dobash, 1979: Walker, 1979). The prevailing narrative of women was of helpless victims (see: "victim ideology", Best, 1997), entrapped in a micro and macro oppressive reality, over which they have little or no control (Dunn & Powell-Williams, 2007). In regard to men, the ruling narrative was of gender-violence, whereby a male in a patriarchal social order oppresses a woman in order to maintain control. Some domestic violence scholars who observed the field over the years would argue that violence against women was only a means to achieve broader women's rights issues and the general feminist agenda.

During the 1970s, the first services for abused women were established and developed on local and national levels: hot-lines, shelters, support and empowering groups (Bograd, 1988; Tierney, 1982). Efforts to ensure government funding were an additional step in obtaining recognition of partner violence as a social problem. At the same time, lobbying for legislation, media coverage and academic interest all picked up simultaneously (Mills, 2008). The findings of the first national study of violence in the American family, "The National Family Violence Survey" (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980), demonstrated the magnitude of the phenomenon in the general population and confused many as to its extent and distribution (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Yllo, 1988). Although these findings already suggested that physical assault is similarly distributed between both genders, the predominance of the feminist argument about the perpetration of partner violence by men made the study of female aggression seem politically incorrect (Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005). Acknowledging the role of women in partner violence ran contrary to the feminist way of thinking, the presentation of the problem, and the professional socialization and training of those working in the area (Brush, 2005; Frieze, 2005).

The 1980s were a time of shifting from non-professional, grassroots, and intuitive modus operandi towards a more professionalized, planned, and at times evaluated, service delivery system which attempted to combine accountability and responsibility on the part of the perpetrators, with support and empowerment for the victims. The introduction of mandatory arrest policies for perpetrators, combined with various models of intervention with batterers were at the forefront (Pence & Paymar, 1993; Rosenfeld, 1992). Ever since, group work is known as the commonly employed mode of PV intervention with both women and men (Abel, 2000; Austin & Dankwort, 1999). With men, two prevailing models were practiced: the feminist psycho-educational model and the cognitive-behavioral model (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004). Law always coerced attendance to these programs and the overwhelming majority of men who attended these interventions were resistant to them (Gondolf, 2002).

During the 1990s the complexities of partner violence became more evident. A number of typologies of male perpetrators (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Johnson, 1995) reiterated the understanding that partner violence is not a unitary phenomenon and that distinctions between types of partner violence should be made (by severity, motivation, direction, and context, to name just a few parameters). These typologies showed strong correlations between severity of personality disorders and severity of abuse and violence. Johnson's typology (Johnson, 1995) also pointed out how sampling strategies tap different types of partner violence and how types of violence differ in their relationship to gender. The study of violence in same-sex intimate relationships among homo-lesbian couples (Burke & Follingstad, 1999; Renzetti & Miley, 1996) and the growing understanding of the psychological and relational variables affecting PV, brought to the surface additional risk factors beyond gender.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the topic of women's use of violence became a source of much debate and research, trying to assess the differences in gender roles in PV (Archer, 2000; Cook & Swan, 2006; Frieze, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Kimmel, 2002; Swan & Snow, 2006). Longitudinal studies which followed young children from the 1970s showed how socio-demographic risk factors are stronger predictors of partner violence than gender or patriarchy (Ehrensaft, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2004; Serbin et al., 2004). At the end of this first decade of the millennia, we know that assaultive behavior in PV does not differ by gender as much as we previously believed (Archer, 2000; Swan & Snow, 2002). Recent research points out that the most common violent dynamics are interactive, situational, and mutual, do not tend to escalate, and are not about controlling the other (Felson & Outlaw, 2007; Hamberger, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Williams & Frieze, 2005). There are still many who claim that women's violence is mostly reactive to male abuse (Banwell, 2010; Flinck & Paavilainen, 2010; Saunders, 2002, Swan & Snow, 2002). Furthermore, though most research shows that men score much higher on incidence of severe violence and coercive control (Johnson, 2006), this data is also controversial (see Straus, this issue).

Still, when the consequences of violence between men and women are compared, women clearly pay a much higher price: they are often controlled by fear whereas men rarely are; and, in general, women tend to be far more vulnerable to posttraumatic symptoms (e.g., 47.6% rates for depression, 63.8% posttraumatic stress disorder) (Golding, 1999). Women are injured more than men (Archer, 2000) and are dramatically more assaulted sexually (Pimlott-Kubiak & Cortina, 2003; Catalano, Smith, Snyder, & Rand, 2009). They also live under more social restraints that make moving out or away from victimhood more difficult; most women are still less independent financially and are usually more tied to the responsibility of child rearing (Williams & Frieze, 2005).

Moreover, some statistical information runs contrary to the gender symmetry argument. For instance, according to The National Crime Victimization Survey in the US (Catalano et al., 2009), most victims of partner violence are women (86%), and most perpetrators are men. In another study of 3750 domestic violence cases filed in state courts (Smith & Farole, 2009), 84% of PV cases involved a male defendant and a female victim, 12% a female defendant and a male victim, and in 4% of the cases, defendant and victim were of the same gender. Yet some argue (Straus, 2006) that such statistics are based on reported rather than actual occurrences by gender and that the feminine voice dominates reporting as males are seldom asked to report and few of them do so voluntarily. Clearly, our knowledge about women victims is far richer than that on men's victimization (Pimlott-Kubiak & Cortina, 2003).

The foregoing is a summary of the development of knowledge and professional discourse in PV over the last four decades and a delineation of the general trend. There is more than one answer to the question of why this was the course of development. Some reasons are scientific; but some are political and ideological and need to be interpreted in the socio-political context which engendered it. Allowing for the fact that intervention always follows far behind knowledge, we must examine how the foregoing developments shaped mainstream intervention goals