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Through a Sociological Lens

The Complexities of Family Violence

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“**F**amily violence” is an umbrella term that encompasses a vast variety of behaviors and people, including violence by parents toward children, violence by children toward parents, violence by men toward women, violence by women toward men, violence by adults toward elderly people, and violence between siblings. In this chapter I explore how sociological perspectives can help in understanding the phenomena of family violence as well as help in understanding the sources of the many controversies surrounding it.

❖ THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY ABOUT FAMILY VIOLENCE

While terms such as “family violence,” “wife abuse,” or “child abuse” most often are used without definition, a sociological perspective

called *social constructionism* emphasizes examining the power and meanings of words (Loseke, 2003).

What is family?

The title of this book, *Current Controversies on Family Violence*, directs attention to violence happening in a particular *place*—in families. This makes sense for the simple reason that FBI statistics (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999) indicate that there is an astonishing amount of violence in American families. It also makes sense to focus on violence in families because, regardless of recurring complaints that actual families often fail their members, family remains an important cultural ideal: Most adults marry and desire children; the right to legal marriage is an important part of gay and lesbian political agendas. In theory and in practice, family is critical to Americans.

While concentrating on violence in families makes sense, it raises a seemingly simplistic question: What *is* a “family”? For example, although there is more violence among people who cohabit than among those who are formally married (Anderson, 1997), are unmarried couples a family? And, if cohabiting heterosexual couples are family, then perhaps cohabiting lesbian and gay couples also should be included, because these relationships contain violence (Renzetti, 1992). What about couples who are merely dating—or who dated in the past? Here, too, there is much violence (Greenfield et al., 1988), but should these types of relationships be classified as family? In the same way, child sexual abuse is perpetrated by men who are “dating” children’s mothers (Patton, 1991, p. 228). Are such men family? In brief, “family” in this current historical era is a rubber-band term. At times, it seems to expand to include people in many types of relationships.

The definition of *family* is critical for examining and understanding violence, because different types of relationships are associated with different characteristics, problems, and possibilities. There are experiential and practical differences between couples who are merely dating and those who are cohabiting, between cohabiting and married couples, and between heterosexual and homosexual couples. Children abused by their biological or legal fathers are in different circumstances than those abused by their mothers’ informal partners. Muddled thinking results when differences are ignored; it matters how *family* is defined.

What is violence?

Examining and understanding family violence also requires careful attention to defining *violence*. What, specifically, do family violence

researchers examine? What, specifically, do members of the public worry about?

There are good reasons why the concern should be with *all* violence: The presence of violence violates cultural images of families as places of peace and solidarity. Yet statistics from national studies consistently paint a picture of American homes as riddled with violence. Pushes, shoves, slaps, and spanks are routine features of family life, and this violence seemingly is done by *everyone* to *anyone*: Siblings are violent toward one another, children hit parents, parents hit children, men hit women, women hit men (see, for example, Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980).

While this statistical portrait challenges cultural images, many—perhaps most—Americans are not terribly concerned with this high prevalence of violence. Instead, there is a common understanding in the United States that not *all* violence is a problem that must be resolved. Violence in self-defense and for other “good reasons,” such as child discipline, often is evaluated as “legitimate”; violence between siblings, as well as some types of violence, such as pushes, slaps, and shoves, often are evaluated as “normal” parts of family life.

Members of the public, academic researchers, and social policy-makers generally are not particularly concerned with “legitimate” or “normal” violence. Instead, concern is with abuse—violence evaluated as *not* normal, and as *not* legitimate. In popular understandings, *abuse* is violence that produces “victims,” people evaluated as suffering greatly and unjustly through no fault of their own (Loseke, 2003). Concern with *abusive* violence yields a picture of American homes as characterized primarily by the presence of child abuse, wife abuse, and elder abuse.

This focus on abusive violence raises two important questions. First, as Richard Gelles and Murray Straus noted some years ago (1979), “abuse” is a *moral evaluation*. Given this, what is—and is not—included as abuse depends on the moral judgments of people using the term. Individual researchers and members of the public have wildly different ideas about what is—and is not—abusive.

A second question is raised by a focus on abusive violence with children, women, and elderly people as the typical victims: Why limit attention to violence experienced in *families*? After all, children are victims of violence in day care centers, elderly people are victims of violence in nursing homes, women are stalked and raped by strangers. Some observers therefore claim that rather than limiting attention to

violence in *families*, it makes more sense to examine the myriad forms of violence experienced by particular *people*: children, women, or the elderly.

A sociological perspective encourages asking questions about the topic: What particular people are being included in definitions of family? What particular behaviors are being included in definitions of violence? Should the focus be on violence happening in families or on violence happening to particular types of people? Answers to these questions influence what is found, how it can be understood, and how it might be resolved.

❖ THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY ABOUT RESEARCH AND STATISTICS

Observers note how divergent definitions of both family and violence have led to conflicting findings, to difficulty in comparing studies (Geffner, Rosenbaum, & Hughes, 1988; Tolliver, Valle, Dopke, Serra, & Milne, 1998), and to problems in developing theories (Azar, 1991). That is only the tip of the iceberg of dilemmas, because research on family violence of all types is plagued by myriad problems (see Belsky, 1993, for one review). Rather than detailing typical problems faced by researchers, I focus on some important questions that should be asked in order to evaluate research.

One critical question is about the *samples* used to gather the data: Who was talked to and/or what records were examined? With the notable exceptions of the Family Violence National Studies (see Straus, this volume) and national crime victimization surveys (Greenfield et al., 1998), the great majority of research on this topic uses *non-random* samples. These commonly involve examining organizational records or talking with clients or service providers in places such as child welfare services, Child Protective Services, counseling centers, or shelters for battered women. Two typical biases result from such commonly used samples.

First, these samples result in bias surrounding estimates of relationships between violence and economic class. This is a well-known empirical association: As income goes down, the amount of violence (both in and out of families) goes up (Greenfield et al., 1998). While national probability samples find this association, data drawn from social service agencies *magnify* it. In the case of child abuse, this is

because protective service workers are likely to simply assume child abuse is occurring when parents are poor (Howitt, 1992; Lane, Rubin, Monteith, & Christian, 2003; O'Toole, Turbett, & Napka, 1983). In technical terms, providers tend to *overdiagnose* abuse in poor families. It follows that children from poor families will be *overrepresented* in research relying on information from child protection agencies. In the case of wife abuse, women often rely on shelters because they do not have the money to pay for a hotel (Loseke, 1992). Poor women therefore are *overrepresented* in research using shelters as sites for data collection. Hence, while national random sample studies *do* show associations between all forms of violence and income, these associations are magnified when data are collected from social service agencies.

There is a second bias resulting from research samples that rely on social service agencies. By definition, women in shelters have experiences severe enough to lead them to leave their homes; by definition, parents being monitored by protective service agencies are people whose behaviors are evaluated as extreme enough to warrant intervention. Yet data from such samples all too often are generalized. Data on the characteristics and experiences of women shelter residents are generalized to *all* battered women; data on the characteristics and experiences of parents monitored by child protective agencies are generalized to *all* abusive parents.

Thinking sociologically about research also requires being thoughtful in interpreting statistics, especially those presented in the mass media.

The mass media are well known for their tendencies to offer glib, "sound bite" answers to perplexing and complicated questions, as well as for their tendencies to magnify and distort information in ways that increase audience interest (Loseke, 2003). It is not that uncommon, for example, to hear statements such as "Abused children grow up to be abusive adults," or for so-called relationship experts on talk shows to tell a troubled woman, "Your husband hit you because his parents hit him." Such statements contain two types of statistical errors.

First, associations between violence and particular characteristics of people often are enormously inflated. Data testing the "intergenerational transmission of abuse" theory, for example, do *not* support the deterministic statement that "abused children grow up to be abusive adults." While there is a moderate association between experiencing child abuse and becoming a child abuser (Black, Heyman, & Slep, 2001), that association is nowhere near perfect (Kaufman & Zigler, 1993). Likewise, there

is only a weak-to-moderate association between experiencing child abuse and becoming an abusive spouse (Stith et al., 2000).

Second, statistical associations measure characteristics or behaviors of *categories* of people (such as poor people/not poor people, or abused as a child/not abused as a child). Categorical associations *cannot* be used to make predictions about individual people in these categories. It is an error in logic to predict that any given *individual* will be violent because she or he is poor or because she or he was abused as a child.

Thinking sociologically about research and statistical findings requires asking how key terms were defined, how samples lead to biases, how data can be inappropriately generalized, and how categorical association cannot be used to predict individual characteristics and behaviors.

❖ THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY ABOUT THE RISK FACTORS OF VIOLENCE

While it is difficult to talk about the “causes” of violence (or of anything else) because the determinants of human behavior are incredibly complex, it is possible to talk about *risk factors*: the characteristics of people, experiences, and environments that put individuals at a greater (or lesser) risk for using violence. These risk factors occur on several levels.

The Biological Level

Because humans are physical creatures, it follows that there can be *biological* risk factors for violence. At this time, little is known about biological risk factors because this research is in its infancy. While very few people believe that biological factors ultimately will account for more than a small amount of family violence, some violence does appear to be associated with intellectual deficits, organic problems, head injuries, and hormones (see Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 1997, for a review). Critically, biological risk factors are potentially helpful only for understanding the behavior of people who are violent in *all* spheres of their lives. Biology *cannot* be referenced when people use violence against family members but not against strangers, employers, or friends.

The Psychological Level

Humans are characterized by complex and symbolic thinking, remembering, emotions, needs, and desires. It follows that there can be *psychological* risk factors for violence. Psychological risk factors of violence that routinely are relayed through the mass media often are trite and mundane and rely on circular reasoning. For example, arguments that violence is caused by "stress" or "low self-esteem" say little, because, *except at the most extreme*, such terms resist empirical measurement. Yet even when psychological diagnosis is done rigorously by highly trained professionals, references to individual-level psychopathology are necessary only to understand the *most extreme* violent behavior (O'Leary, 1993). Psychological theories are of no help in understanding why "spankings," "pushes," "shoves," and "slaps" are a routine feature of family life; they become necessary when violence is obviously and most certainly abusive.

While recognizing biological and psychological risk factors, sociological perspectives strongly argue that these rarely are sufficient, and often are not even necessary, to understand violence. The search for the risk factors of violence can not end at the level of individual biology or psychology.

The Interactional Level

Because family violence involves people who know one another, violence might be associated with characteristics of *interaction*. Some observers, for example, use categories such as "common couple violence" (Carlson, 1997; Johnson, 1995) or "mutual combat" (Straus, this volume) to conceptualize violence between adults that results from the complexities of family life when disagreements can lead to arguments and arguments can lead to violence.

While marriage counselors offering couples therapy focus on changing patterns of interaction associated with violence, much caution is in order, because "common couples violence" is only one form of violence between adults. The other form is "wife abuse" (Loseke & Kurz, and Yllö, this volume). This is one-way violence, where women are victims and men are offenders using violence to control women. While wife abuse involves an interactional dynamic because men interactionally intimidate women (Lloyd, 1999), it is a grave error to speculate that battered women are implicated in this interactional dynamic.

The interactional level therefore can account for only some violence. Too much emphasis on this interactional level can divert attention from understanding the complexity of violence (Bograd, 1984); it can serve to unjustly blame victims.

The Social Structural Level

While recognizing that in some ways each family is unique, sociological perspectives focus on examining characteristics shared by many, if not most, families. A full understanding of something as complex as family violence requires looking closely at how social environments can be a risk factor for violence.

Not surprisingly, because family violence can be conceptualized as including many types of behaviors (from “spanking” to “murder”) involving victims and offenders in any and all family categories, there is not one sociological theory that can adequately account for all violence. Feminism (Yllö, this volume), for example, is a form of sociological theory that explores the consequences of the gendered social environment. Theories informed by feminism are excellent in examining the social conditions and forces allowing and even encouraging the victimization of women by men. Yet, as Yllö comments, feminist-inspired theories are not particularly useful in understanding other forms of violence, such as child abuse, sibling abuse, or elder abuse. In addition, because feminist theories begin with the a priori labeling of women as victims and men as offenders, they also are unable to conceptualize women’s violence toward men except as violence done in self-defense.

While sociological theories of family violence are woefully undeveloped, two general theories of crime and violence have obvious relevance to the topic of family violence.

Control Theory. Rather than asking why some people *are* violent, control theory asks why most people are *not* violent. The theoretical answer is that people are controlled by bonds to other people and to social institutions and by the fear of punishment. Some research has demonstrated this relationship for family violence: Men who have strong attachments to and who fear negative sanctions from significant others are less likely to be wife abusers than are men who do not have such attachments (Lackey & Williams, 1995). Likewise, the threat of arrest for wife abuse is a deterrent (control) primarily for men who have valued attachments to home, work, and community (Sherman, 1992).

Resource Theory. This perspective helps to understand relationships between income and violence. Resource theory maintains that force (violence) is a resource that can be used to resolve conflicts, and that in our modern world it is most often a resource of “last resort,” used when all else fails (Goode, 1971). This theory could be used to note that economically advantaged parents wishing to punish or control their children can take away their children’s computers, televisions, or private phones. In many instances, this would be sufficient to bring a child’s behavior into line with parental expectations, so there would be no need for physical force. Because economically disadvantaged parents cannot take away possessions their children do not have, they might turn to the use of physical force more quickly. In the same way, men with high income and social standing have a variety of resources by which to control their wives; men without such resources might more quickly turn to physical force (Anderson, 1997).

Control and resource theories are general perspectives that help understand risk factors for many types of crime, including family violence. In addition, sociology often characterizes family as a social institution, and this leads to other types of risk factors for violence.

Family as a Social Institution. Each social institution (such as family, economy, religion, or education) has three characteristics. First, social institutions include more-or-less agreed-upon *ideas*. Although there has been significant social change, the institution of family includes ideas such as families should be private, parents should care for their children, family members should be emotionally close and share activities, and so on. Second, social institutions include *practices*—the ways people typically act toward one another. Again, although there has been considerable social change, typical practices in American families include a division of labor between spouses, economic dependence of children on their parents, parental socialization of their children, and so on. Finally, social institutions include *arrangements*—objective characteristics of the social world that are outside individual control. In the case of family, these include laws surrounding marriage, divorce, and child protective services, as well as the characteristics of child and elder care, and the organization of employment.

In multiple and complex ways, these—and many other—institutional characteristics of family can be conceptualized as risk factors for violence. For example, in ideas and in practice, family is associated with privacy, and increasing levels of privacy lead to social isolation,

which is associated with higher rates of family violence of all types (Belsky, 1993; Williams, 1992). Likewise, the gendered core of typical divisions of labor, as well as stereotypical ideas about gender, are associated with wife abuse (Brown & Hendricks, 1998); strong beliefs that parents have the right to discipline and control their children are associated with child abuse (Belsky, 1993). Furthermore, the idealized image that family members should know the intimate details of one another's lives leads families to be emotional hotbeds: Family members often know better than any one else what can be said or done that will most deeply hurt another.

Examining the characteristics of family as a social institution leads to a perplexing realization that the very characteristics drawing people to value family relationships create a fertile ground for violence. Ideas about how families should be organized, typical ways family members behave toward one another, and the characteristics of the social structures supporting these ideas and expectations allow—if not downright encourage—violence.

❖ THE IMPORTANCE OF THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

My goal in this chapter was to demonstrate how thinking sociologically about family violence means thinking in complex ways. This is the power of sociological perspectives: To think about and question research before accepting findings, to understand differences between statistical associations and predictions about individual behavior, to understand that humans are complex creatures and that what goes on inside us is influenced by what goes on outside us. Sociology is a way of thinking about the world.

Yet clearly, sociological perspectives are not as popular as psychological perspectives, especially those routinely paraded through the mass media. The compelling nature of psychological perspectives makes sense because they seem to pose simple solutions to severe and complex problems: If violence is about individual psychopathology, then violent people merely need to be "repaired" and the problems will be resolved. The allure of psychological perspectives also is that these theories pertain primarily to people who use extreme violence, and these are the people who are the object of public fascination.

Finally, psychological theories are undoubtedly more popular than sociological theories because they do not challenge us to think

about relationships between social organization and violence. Sociological perspectives encourage us to explore how family violence—in its many forms—can be a consequence of a lack of community or of poverty. These perspectives encourage us to explore how the ideas, practices, and arrangements of the institution of family can create a fertile ground for violence. Yes, indeed, sociological perspectives raise difficult questions. Yet violence can not be understood or stopped if such questions are swept under the carpet simply because they are troublesome.

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