Making Sociological Sense Out of Trends in Intimate Partner Violence

The Social Structure of Violence Against Women

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Despite evidence of a cultural shift in orientations toward violence, the problem of violence against women persists across a range of different societies. The preoccupation with the psychology of violence and the focus on cultural orientations obscure the more salient features of social life that promote violence: the structure of interpersonal relationships. The exploration of sociodemographic correlates and the search for "risk factors" of intimate partner violence have overshadowed the inclusion of a distinct set of social structural characteristics that are conducive to domestic violence. The current article draws on comparative research and Donald Black's theoretical approach to argue that key factors include (a) the degree of social isolation, (b) interdependence of support networks, (c) inequality, (d) relational distance, (e) centralization of authority, and (f) exposure to violent networks. The weak explanatory power of previous research can be improved by developing measures to evaluate an integrated structural model of violence against women.

Keywords: *intimate partner violence; social structure*

From a comparative standpoint, violence against women occurs across all geographical regions and among societies that range in complexity from hunter-gatherers to advanced industrial societies (Counts, Brown, & Campbell, 1992; Erchak & Rosenfeld, 1994; Sev'er, 1997). Although difficult to estimate accurately, cross-cultural research has documented that some societies have much

higher rates of violence against women than others (Haj-Yahia, 2000; Kim & Cho, 1992). Yet the research confirms that the problem persists in contemporary Western societies as well (cf. Hagemann-White, 2001). The current article argues that domestic violence endures in large part because the social structure of interpersonal relationships within societies continues to provide the fertile conditions that spawn and perpetuate the use of violence. In drawing on comparative research and previous theoretical arguments, the article ultimately suggests a more integrative theoretical approach that can be tested against the evidence in future research.

LIMITATIONS OF THE CULTURAL FOCUS

Jennifer Howard (2002) has prescribed 10 specific actions that individuals can do to help end violence in women's lives. The recommendations include everything from listening to women and believing them, to speaking out against negative media images, to participating in acts of remembrance. The implicit argument suggests that violence stems from patriarchal beliefs and values or the manifestations of a violent culture. Hence, the solution requires that the cultural acceptance of violence must be challenged, that survivors' voices should be raised to empower others, and that children should be taught to handle their conflicts nonviolently. These are certainly laudable objectives. Such efforts, however, cannot succeed fully without considering the social structures within which violence tends to be embedded. Simply stated, violence has much deeper roots in the structural foundations of interpersonal relationships (and societal arrangements in general) that may be expressed or even justified through particular cultural orientations.

In some ways, the cultural conditions have already changed, especially in countries such as Canada at the dawn of the 21st century. To be sure, violence still pervades many aspects of cultural life, with disturbing media images, misogynistic lyrics in popular music, the idolization of certain sports figures, and in many other arenas (see *Tough Guise*; Media Education Foundation, 1999). Yet in some respects, the culture has shifted in measurably *non*violent directions. For example, the public readily acknowledges that violence does not represent an acceptable form of "conflict man-

agement," and most believe that domestic violence constitutes a widespread problem (e.g., Florida Department of Corrections, 1999). A recent national poll indicates that the majority of Canadians (62%) believe that family violence is a more serious problem than a decade earlier, with 70% agreeing that spousal violence constitutes a crime (EKOS Research Associates, 2002).

Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of men and women alike believe in gender equality (Michalski, 1999), and the Canadian government has supported equal rights for women, both within Canada and internationally. The Canadian Parliament strongly denounced violence against women following the 1989 Montréal massacre of 14 female university students, first by establishing December 6 as the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women in 1991. The federal government subsequently funded an alliance of five research centers with the mission "to build community and academic partnerships to carry out research and public education to eliminate violence against women and children, and family violence" (Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence, 2002). More generally, the Family Violence Initiative has supported community-based research, the development of various ethnocultural awareness resources, and public education campaigns through partnerships with the broadcasting community (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 1998).

Men have assumed a leadership role as well through the White Ribbon Campaign, which has a Web site (www.whiteribbon.ca) that identifies a range of community events and educational materials. The supporters have sponsored many antiviolence rallies and vigils that have drawn thousands of supporters and advocates spanning the political spectrum. The Web sites and educational resources devoted to both recognizing the problem of violence against women and advocating for solutions have grown enormously over the past decade.

To focus primarily on the cultural dimensions of violence, however, may mean a failure to recognize the underlying structural features that perpetuate violence against women from one generation to the next. One might even boldly assert that the intergenerational transmission of violence reflects much more of a structural perpetuation than a culturally transmitted set of values and beliefs. Thus, despite the widespread acknowledgement that

spousal violence represents a crime and the belief by the majority of Canadians that the court system has treated family violence cases too lightly (EKOS Research Associates, 2002), the research indicates that many individuals nevertheless will behave violently toward their intimate partners. Studies have shown, for example, that roughly one quarter of Canadian women report experiencing one or more types of physical violence by their partners at some point in their relationships (Randall & Haskell, 1995; Weir, 2000). A survey of Toronto women's shelters in 1995 revealed that there were no immediate beds available in any of more than a dozen existing shelters, as one executive director explained that even if 10 new shelters opened immediately, they would quickly be filled to capacity (Michalski, 1995). The resources committed to creating a culture of nonviolence have not been entirely successful in eliminating violence against women, although some evidence suggests that the problem may be on the wane.

THE EMPIRICAL CONTEXT

An important empirical focus has been whether domestic violence has declined in recent years. For example, the available data suggest that the rates of lethal intimate partner violence declined in both Canada and the United States during the 1990s (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1999; Puzone, Saltzman, Kresnow, Thompson, & Mercy, 2000). The Canadian data indicate that the rates stood at nearly 12 female partners (married, common-law, separated, or divorced) per million couples in 1991, declining to 6.3 per million in 2000. For men, the rates dropped from 4.4 per million to about 2 per million couples (Bunge & Sauvé, 2002). Spousal homicides nevertheless accounted for slightly more than one in six solved homicides in 1998 and 1999 (Statistics Canada, 2000). What about nonlethal forms of violence?

The two main data sources on which to base such estimates in Canada and the United States are (a) official statistics derived from incidents reported to the police, hospitals, coroners, and other social agencies; and (b) victimization surveys that rely on self-reported experiences with violence. The prevalence and incidence rates vary depending on the source, with official rates of intimate partner violence almost always much lower than those

obtained from victimization surveys. An even more contentious issue in the study of domestic violence involves the extent to which physical violence occurs mutually among both spouses or partners.

The official police report data in Canada reveal that women clearly comprise a higher percentage of spousal assault victims than men. Based on the Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR-II), women represented a much higher percentage (roughly 85%) of the more than 22,000 instances of spousal violence (including married and common-law partners) reported to the police in 1997 (Fitzgerald, 1999).[1] The data further reveal that the number of spousal violence victims that came to the attention of the police in Canada declined somewhat from 1995 to 1997 but then increased substantially from 1998 to 2000. Overall, the total number of spousal violence victims across a standardized subset of police forces increased by 27% from 1995 to 2000 or from 21,733 victims in 1995 to 27,663 in 2000 (Trainor, Lambert, & Dauvergne, 2002, p. 8).

As an alternative to the UCR-II data, one can rely on data gathered for two cycles of the General Social Survey (GSS): the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey and the 1999 General Social Survey on Victimization. In both surveys, interviewers asked respondents in contact with spouses during the past 5 years several questions about experiences of violence with their current or former partners, using a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Johnson & Hotton, 2001). Although the surveys both estimated 1-year wife assaults of 3%, the 5-year prevalence rates declined significantly from 12% in 1993 to 8% in 1999. Hence, the victimization data provide evidence of a decrease in spousal violence during the 1990s in contrast to the official UCR-II crime data. The discrepancy may be explained in part by the fact that, according to the self-report data, the percentage of female spousal assault victims reporting the violence increased from 29% in 1993 to 37% in 1999 (Trainor et al., 2002). Indeed, the increase in reporting confirms that the two data sources really speak to two analytically distinct issues that require separate explanations (i.e., what accounts for changes in *reporting* behaviors to the police versus what determines the likelihood of individuals experiencing violence in their intimate relationships?). In both surveys, however, women continued to experience higher rates of domestic violence

than their male counterparts. Yet even those who argue that men are clearly more violent are perplexed as to "why a relatively small percentage of men batter, given the advantages to be gained" and lament the fact that "we have little sense of the psychological dynamics leading to the decision to use violence" (Yllö, 1993, p. 57).

The current article argues that such a preoccupation with the psychology of violence, demographic risk factors, and cultural conditioning in general obscures the more salient features of social life that promote violence: the structure of social relationships. Although theories of intimate partner violence abound, most only tangentially or indirectly deal with social structure. Instead, the theories usually suggest either explicitly or implicitly the notion that individuals learn to behave in a violent fashion, whether due to biochemical processes, stress, rewards, imitation, systemic needs, or control dynamics. Other than feminist theories that focus on patriarchal structures, few analysts have taken seriously the notion that key structural conditions may promote violence against women. The next section provides a brief overview of the competing models and considers some of the available evidence.

THEORIES OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

The etiology of family violence, and intimate partner violence in particular, has received considerable theoretical attention since the 1970s, as various perspectives attempt to link the origins of violence to different levels of analysis (Heise, 1998; Loue, 2000). Some theories focus on the individual, who may be driven to violence due to organic factors (genetic predisposition, hormonal imbalances, neurotransmitters) or psychological characteristics, including acceptance of aggression, locus of control, stress, and impulsiveness (O'Leary, 1993; Tweed & Dutton, 1998). In the extreme, Dutton (1999) described how the use of violence reflects a confluence of personality features that may include extreme jealousy, fear of abandonment, projecting blame, or a constellation referred to as borderline personality organization.

Others stress the social psychological aspects of aggression and violence. For example, exchange theorists argue that cost-benefit analyses dominate individual action such that violence

occurs when the benefits or rewards outweigh possible costs or associated punishments (Gelles, 1983). Social learning theories are perhaps the most well-known, with key factors that include observational learning, differential association, and positive reinforcement (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). Much of the work on the intergenerational transmission of violence stems from such a perspective (Allan, 1991; Egeland, 1993; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990). Ecological theories attempt to bridge the distance between interpersonal interaction and societal forces more generally (Belsky, 1980). The approach links violence in the home with the broader social environment, including background factors, the micro system of the family, their formal and informal social network ties, and the macro system or culture (cf. Heise, 1998).

Among societal-level theories, perhaps the most developed include general system theory, the subculture of violence theory, and feminist approaches. Straus (1973) has applied general system theory to explain how family violence stems from a positive, complex feedback system. The system operates at the individual, family, and societal levels, which adjust to decrease, maintain, or even increase levels of violence within the family (Giles-Sims, 1983). The subculture of violence thesis argues that certain groups accept values that justify the use of force, which helps to explain the uneven distribution of violence in society and the greater prevalence especially among those in the lower classes (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1982). Although individuals certainly can be expected to learn from their immediate families, the subculture to which they belong may express a more generalized acceptance of violence as a legitimate aspect of dispute resolution.

Finally, several theorists in recent years have developed different versions of feminist theory, with an attendant emphasis on patriarchy. Dobash and Dobash (1979) have argued, for example, that violence against women can be explained as follows: (a) Wife assault represents a systematic form of domination and social control of women by men, (b) more assaults are perpetrated by men who hold patriarchal attitudes, and (c) the use of violence to maintain male dominance tends to be acceptable to society, especially where laws and customs combine to uphold the differential power between men and women. The theory has been used to explain intimate partner violence at a societal level and the histor-

ical patterns of violence against women (Duffy & Momirov, 1997; Sanday, 1981). Although there are many variants of feminist analyses, the key explanatory emphases are the structures of gender-based inequalities of power and control (Sev'er, 2002; Yllö, 1993). Violence against female partners represents an expression of male domination and female subordination, which includes a range of different coercive "control tactics" (Brown-ridge, 2002; Ferree, 1990).

How well does the empirical research support competing models of intimate partner violence? The question cannot be answered adequately as most large-scale, quantitative surveys have not been designed with explicit attention to existing theoretical models or at best have used proxy measures for key indicators. Indeed, the national-level studies often assess the full spectrum of "risk factors" as defined by standard sociodemographic and economic characteristics (Gordon, 2000). The studies typically have shown that poverty, marital status (separated or divorced), type of union (common-law), unemployment, and age (younger couples) are among the more consistent correlates (Bunge, 2000; Jewkes, 2002; Moreno, El-Bassel, Gilbert, & Wada, 2002; Smith, 1990). By the same token, these studies fail to account for more than about 10% of the variation in the annual incidence of intimate partner violence (Aldarondo, Kantor, & Jasinski, 2002; Haj-Yahia, 2000; Huang & Gunn, 2001).

In the Canadian context, Michalski (2002) has confirmed these results as well: The full slate of sociodemographic, economic, physical vulnerability, and coercive control factors examined in regression analyses of 1999 GSS data explain only 10% of the variation in who has experienced incidents of violence by a current or former partner within the past 5 years. Thus, the most commonly identified risk factors, which do not always register as statistically significant correlates across studies, consistently have failed to exert much explanatory power. Even low income or poverty, which some researchers believe to be a universal predictor of domestic violence, does not necessarily surface as a significant correlate in each research study (Aldarondo et al., 2002; Huang & Gunn, 2001).

Many theories, though, have received at least some empirical support through small-scale studies that employ nonrepresen-

tative samples (Harvey & Gow, 1994; Rao, 1997). For example, some research has shown that children who observe violence are at greater risk for adult violence than those who experience violence directly themselves (Rodgers, 1994; cf. Ellsberg, Pena, Herrera, Lijiestrand, & Winkvist, 2001). The exposure to violence tends to be reinforced both within the family and through extra-familial factors, such as peer support (Reitzel-Jaffe & Wolfe, 2001; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 2000). Other research on battered women supports the argument of domestic violence as domination, in which the male batterer enforces perceived entitlements through physical force, the threat of force, or other expressions of power and control (Yllö & Bograd, 1988). Brownridge (2002) has demonstrated a statistical link between patriarchal dominance (e.g., restricting access to family income) and increased odds of intimate partner violence. Those who hold more patriarchal attitudes within the family have higher rates of violence as well, with all else constant (Smith, 1990). Finally, Moreno et al. (2002) reported on the impact of extreme poverty among those in methadone treatment programs as a significant risk factor for violence against women, reasoning that the combination of economic dependency and stress associated with financial hardship leaves women vulnerable.

In short, even brief reviews will point to at least modest support for many of the theories proposed. A more adequate test of alternative theories, however, requires more explicit measures of their central concepts rather than the use of proxies. Although some researchers argue for increased standardization of incidence-based statistics as the key measurement issue (Brownridge & Halli, 1999), the continued exploration of sociodemographic correlates and the search for risk factors of intimate partner violence have overshadowed the inclusion of most of the relevant sociological predictors. Hence, researchers have concluded that key explanatory factors from existing theories should be included in future research (Hoffman, Demo, & Edwards, 1994; Huang & Gunn, 2001). The argument here, though, suggests that these factors should be consistent with the extant comparative research, which highlights a distinct set of social structural characteristics that place women at risk for experiencing domestic violence. These are outlined in the following section.

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Despite the widespread prevalence of domestic violence across families and within the general population, the vast majority of disputes or disagreements are not handled by resorting to violence. Most of the theoretical and empirical research, however, has tended to focus exclusively on the presence of violence, reasoning that individuals in intimate partner relationships either have experienced violence—or not (cf. Jewkes, Levin, & Loveday, 2002). Far less often have analysts examined the full range of responses to conflict or attempted to develop models that account for why some disputes turn violent and others are handled in vastly different ways. The key to understanding domestic violence, then, involves recognizing those structural features of social life that are more conducive to violent than nonviolent confrontation.

Violence against women appears to be widespread in the comparative context, across a tremendous range of different cultures and societies at varying developmental stages (Erchak & Rosenfeld, 1994; Levinson, 1989). Although not necessarily a universal phenomenon, the conditions within these many societies may yield a great many opportunities for violence to emerge. Herein lies the key to understanding violence against women. Whether culturally sanctioned or not, and, for that matter, whether individual men believe in violence or not, violence still occurs. Violence does not, however, simply occur anywhere or, more important, with anyone and under any circumstances. Rather, those who behave violently toward their intimates on some occasions will refrain from violence in other situations and within other social contexts. What, then, determines the likelihood of violence occurring? The structure of interpersonal relationships.

In other words, domestic violence can be conceptualized as only one possible strategy among many for handling grievances (Black, 1998; Tucker & Ross, in press). To be sure, many observers would likely characterize the use of violence as conflict *mis*management, but the fact remains that conflict management strategies can assume many different forms. Black (1990) has developed a typology to describe conflict management strategies as consisting of one of five generic types: avoidance, tolerance, settlement,

negotiation, and self-help. Violence represents a specific form of self-help that involves inflicting pain on another without consent.

In the current article, violence may often (but not always) arise in intimate relationships as a type of moralistic response or social control exercised against those with whom one has a grievance. As Cooney (1998) explained, "In the typical act of violence, somebody seeks to manage or prosecute a conflict, to right a wrong" (pp. 3-4). To be clear, the reasoning in no way implies that violent behavior constitutes a "moral" response or one to be condoned. Instead, violence can be viewed as a "moralistic" response whereby one party attempts to settle their differences or to punish someone through the use of violence. But why use violence if alternative mechanisms for settling disputes are available and, indeed, are often encouraged?

There are several structural features of interpersonal relationships that promote alternative forms of conflict management (Black, 1990; Cooney, 1998). Based on the available comparative research, several conditions are associated with lower levels of violent dispute resolution between intimate partners. These sociological factors have received considerable support in the literature but have not been fully integrated into a cohesive theoretical model or adequately tested across cases of domestic violence. In particular, domestic violence should occur less often if the social relationship can be described as embedded within or having the following characteristics:

1. a low degree of social isolation or strong network support,
2. mutually interdependent or integrated support networks or those with more cross-cutting ties between the principals,
3. a higher degree of equality or relatively equal access to and control of material resources,
4. a lower level of intimacy combined with decreased cultural distance,
5. low centralization of authority,
6. access to nonviolent networks or alternative forms of dispute resolution.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

The first sociological factor focuses on social isolation, or the degree to which partisans are available or may be called on for

support (Klein & Milardo, 2000; Neilsen, Endo, & Ellington, 1992). As Brown (1992) explained,

> A wife is in a much more vulnerable position and there is a far greater likelihood that she will be ill-treated, if she is isolated from her family by rules for post-marital residence that compel her to move to her husband's distant community at marriage. (p. 12)

Baumgartner (1993) built on the anthropological literature to develop her central argument that "as the degree of social support available to the wife increases, the likelihood of violence against her decreases" (p. 213). By such reasoning, the most vulnerable partners include those who are relatively isolated or lacking in social supports in relation to a partner who has extensive social supports. For example, Harrison (2002) reported on the abusive relationships experienced by Canadian military wives. These women may be isolated from their families and other supporters due to the geographic mobility associated with postings and may be subjected to a variety of additional isolating features of military life.

In contrast, the availability of partisan support can directly affect the likelihood of a partner resorting to violence and may reduce the severity of such attacks when they may occur. Thus, matrilocal marital arrangements, for example, should lessen the extent and degree of intimate violence but only to the extent that others are able and willing to sanction potential aggressors. Baumgartner (1993) cited a variety of cross-cultural examples as evidence in support of the proposition, such as Amhara women of Ethiopia, the Lugbara of Uganda, Cheyenne Indians of the North American Plains, and the Mundurucu of South America. In those societies in which men are relatively isolated or without support, perhaps living in the village of their wives and her extended family, violence against women by their husbands becomes considerably less likely. Nash (1992) explained that domestic violence or intimate partner violence almost never occurs among the Nagovisi of Papua New Guinea primarily due to the matrilineal and uxorilocal nature of family life, whereby most men move to their wife's settlement at marriage. As Nash (1992) has summarized, "People come to the aid of quarrelling couples: they feel that they should interfere. In town, isolation makes it easier to act

on violent impulses and to carry them out without interference from concerned relatives or neighbors" (p. 107).

The partisan support that a woman receives generally comes in the form either of economic support (e.g., a willingness to provide a place to live or an "exit") or through direct political support, such as the exercise of violence against the husband on the woman's behalf. For example, Cribb and Barnett (1997) studied Western Samoan women's responses to domestic violence, suggesting that traditional extended family networks offered important escape routes for women with violent partners. In addition, the degree to which violence can be hidden from public view can limit partisan support. As Brown (1992) explained,

> The isolation of a wife is also determined by the degree of privacy a society traditionally assigns to the domestic sphere. In general when domestic activities take place almost entirely out of doors and in full view of the rest of the community, or when domestic activity is audible through thin house walls, it is less likely that women will be battered because others will step in. There is greater danger that wives will be abused when the domestic sphere is veiled in privacy. (p. 13)

Others beyond the immediate family can intervene as third-party supporters as well, thus shaping the likelihood of domestic violence (cf. Cooney, 1998). Lazarus-Black (2001), for example, described the case of Trinidad and Tobago, which passed the Domestic Violence Act in 1991 to provide for temporary restraining orders. One such situation involves the abuser's willingness to grant an "undertaking," meaning that he will undertake to discontinue any future behavior related to the allegations of his partner. Although restraining orders may not always prevent further violence in Canada and the United States, Lazarus-Black (2001) explained the effectiveness of the undertaking in Trinidad and Tobago thusly: "Rumor has it that some police constables are quite willing to impose a few 'licks' on men they pick up for defying court orders. Hence men's fear of other men—men in uniform—may keep some women safe from further violence" (p. 398). Whatever the psychological processes involved, the theory suggests that the presence of third parties helps shape whether or not men continue to be violent or abusive toward their partners or former partners. The networks of supporters may involve kith

and kin or may extend to the level of formal control, such as the case of local police in Trinidad and Tobago.

INTEGRATED NETWORKS

The concept of integrated networks implies a certain degree of interdependence or functional unity, with more extensive mutual or cross-cutting ties. Colson (1953) first developed the logic of cross-cutting ties to describe how the Plateau Tonga of southern Zambia maintained highly peaceable relations in the absence of formal governments. Her reasoning suggested that the density of cross-cutting ties provided a powerful inducement to resolve disputes without violence. Cooney (1998) reported, too, that the Semai have a low degree of interpersonal violence, in part due to the overlapping nature of kinship relations, whereby extensive networks of support assist potential disputants in meeting a range of challenges.

The logic can certainly apply to intimate partnerships, wherein cross-cutting ties and functionally interdependent networks should curtail the likelihood of interpersonal violence occurring during disputes. In the absence of such integrated networks (all else constant), the intimate partners have less social pressure to maintain a civil relationship when conflicts arise. The proposition thus emerges that violence will be more prevalent among couples who maintain a high degree of functional independence from extended family relations or those wherein their social networks have fewer cross-cutting ties.

INEQUALITY

Another factor widely documented in the literature, and especially among feminist analysts, involves gender inequality (Gelles, 1993; cf. Sev'er, 2002). Levinson (1989) argued that in those societies in which women do not have equal access to economic or political resources, the likelihood of abuse increases. As Ofei-Aboagye (1997) explained with reference to Ghanaian society, "There is a correlation between traditional norms, women's inequality, and wife abuse in Ghana. The rationale behind domestic abuse stems from the traditionally inferior position of the wife" (p. 123).

Maundeni (2002) has shown that the lack of resources that women have relative to their abusive husbands in Botswana helps to account for why women remain in abusive relationships. She argues that women occupy an inferior status or subordinate position to men and that even their families will often tell the women that they should persevere to make the marriage work. Similarly, Mahajan (1995) explained wife abuse in India as due in part to a combination of economic dependency and the relative lack of support from either families of orientation or other informal networks. As a final example, McClusky (1999) found evidence that among Mayan women in Belize, limited economic opportunities and low education reinforce women's dependency on men such that many have difficulty escaping domestic violence.

RELATIONAL DISTANCE

Another factor appears to be the level of intimacy or "relational distance," by which Black (1976) meant "the degree to which [people] participate in one another's lives" (p. 40). Some theoretical formulations suggest that the use of violence appears to have a curvilinear relationship in conflict management (Black, 1990; Cooney, 1998). All else constant, violence tends to be used more often among those who have lower levels of relational distance—thus, a higher degree of intimacy—and among those who are relationally distant but with low mobility (being "stuck" with each other in some senses).

For present purposes, the main interest concerns the more intimate nature of social relationships within the domestic sphere. Indeed, Grandin and Lupri (1997) concluded in their comparative analysis of intimate violence in Canada and the United States that "in many couples the intimate partners are both the perpetrators and the victims of violence. The etiology of such partner abuse is grounded in intimacy" (p. 40). The intimacy factor, therefore, in some ways helps to predict and explain the greater likelihood of violence among intimate partner disputes than, for instance, disputes between office coworkers or between neighbors.

Intimacy, however, is not constant. Although two people involved in an intimate, relatively stable, and (usually) socially recognized relationship may constitute a "couple" in the popular

sense of that term, the relational distance between them can vary enormously. Herein lies an interesting paradox. Within the broad spectrum of intimate partner relationships, increased relational distance appears to be associated with an increased likelihood of domestic violence. For example, those who are married have less relational distance than those who are living together. The theory predicts, then, that the rates of intimate partner violence should be higher among those who are cohabiting than among those who are married. In Canada, recent victimization data confirm that pattern, as 4% of common-law partners reported spousal violence compared to 1% of their married counterparts (Bunge, 2000).

As relational distance increases among intimates, the degree of domestic violence should increase as well up to a point. Hence, there should be higher levels of intimate partner violence among those who have been together for shorter periods of time (which reflects one dimension of relational distance) than among those who have been together longer. Such a factor would help to account for higher rates of intimate partner violence among those who are young (Bunge, 2000). Indeed, there are many dimensions of relational distance, and if measured properly, these should help to explain intimate partner violence. In the extreme, or when partners have such a vast relational distance between them that they virtually do not participate in each other's lives, then we would expect relationship violence to dissipate or disappear altogether.

CENTRALIZATION OF AUTHORITY

Just as more centralized state authorities tend to be more repressive and have higher levels of violence (Rummel, 1994), the same principle appears to apply to intimate partner relationships as well (Brown, 1992). The notion of centralized authority refers to the concentration of available political resources in the hands of one party, such as a patriarchal family situation in which a male authority figure monopolizes decision making. Under these conditions, the theory predicts higher rates of violent social control than in circumstances in which authority tends to be more diffuse or distributed more equally.

Herein feminist theory has been especially fruitful in theorizing about domestic violence, for any concentration of power in the hands of particular authorities will tend to be associated with

higher levels of violence. Not surprisingly, some research has shown that patriarchal relationships tend to be more violent. McKee (1992) discussed an Andean community in Ecuador, for example: "If a man feels his domestic authority compromised in some manner, the reaction of other men and his reading of his gender role can lead him to beat his wife" (p. 140). The case of Botswana, mentioned earlier, provides a further example of the concentration of authority. Maundeni (2002) explained that some women apparently stay in abusive relationships because "their husbands are the unquestionable head of families and have the final decision-making powers in family matters" (p. 268). In families that are more egalitarian with respect to power and decision-making structures, the theory predicts that, ceteris paribus, the rates of domestic violence should be lower as well.

VIOLENT NETWORK EXPOSURE

Finally, the historical experience of social networks refers to the presence or absence of violent networks of social relations within which the disputants were raised. The notion parallels the thesis of social learning models but with an emphasis on the degree to which available networks afforded opportunities to resolve disputes through nonviolent strategies of conflict management (e.g., Reitzel-Jaffe & Wolfe, 2001). One would expect that those who were raised in environments more conducive to violent means of conflict resolution, or who therefore witnessed more violence among intimates, might be more likely to engage in violence as social control later in life (Mahajan, 1995; Widom, 1989).

Consistent with such a model, witnessing violence and prior victimization both predict the use of violence in managing conflict to some extent (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). Research has shown further that prior use of physical aggression serves as a potent predictor of future use of aggression (O'Leary, 1993). As O'Leary (1993) has summarized, "As the level of violence in the family of origin increases, spouse abuse is much more likely" (p. 10). Furthermore, current networks of social support may encourage the use of violence to handle grievances rather than the use of alternative means (DeKeseredy, 1990) or may involve partisan supporters who otherwise might increase the likelihood of violence occurring (Cooney, 1998).

IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The preceding discussion has highlighted several structural characteristics of interpersonal relations that have implications for future analytic work with respect to violence against women and the conditions under which conflicts turn violent more generally. The propositions developed have been drawn mainly from comparative analyses, integrating a vast array of patterns into one overarching structural framework. Hence, the theory represents primarily a synthesis of previous work rather than an entirely new theory as such. The approach presents a concise model that emphasizes the immediacy of relational variables and the social contexts within which domestic violence tends to occur rather than attributing "causality" to the individual characteristics of perpetrators or survivors. Most important from an analytic standpoint, the theory can be tested across a range of different societies with rigorous measures of the aforementioned concepts.

Moreover, the structural analysis has further implications for service responses to the problem of domestic violence. The proliferation of women's shelters, for example, represents a logical and potentially effective response for women attempting to leave abusive relationships (Trainor et al., 2002). The expansion of shelter systems or transition houses typically occurs in the context of more urban, advanced industrial societies that tend to promote the types of structural conditions and interpersonal relationships conducive to domestic violence: high rates of social and geographic mobility, neolocal marital arrangements, a gendered distribution of resources, high levels of privacy, and often greater social distance from one's neighbors. The presence of women's shelters, then, counteracts many of these conditions that are conducive to violence. The shelter system alters the social structural landscape in favor of women to some limited degree. In explaining the reduction in self-reported experiences of violence over the 1990s, Johnson and Hotton (2001) concluded,

> This overall decline in the incidence of wife assault may have been influenced by a variety of factors including the increased availability of shelters and other services for abused women, increased use of services and increased reporting to police by abused women, mandatory arrest policies for men who assault their spouses, improved training for police officers and crown attorneys, and

coordinated interagency referrals in many jurisdictions. Other fac-
tors that may also have played a role include recent growth in the
number of treatment programs for violent men, positive changes
in women's social and economic status that may enable them to
more easily leave abusive relationships, violence prevention pro-
grams, and changes in societal attitudes that recognize wife assault
as a crime. (p. 27)

Indeed, the previous analysis suggests that conflicts will be
handled differently and perhaps nonviolently only if one changes
the social structure of intimate relationships. If social relation-
ships within families are structured to isolate women, to weaken
systems of social support, to centralize authority, to deny access to
economic resources, and to increase their relational distance, then
violence will more often ensue. If one changes the social structure
of familial relations, however, or identifies other supportive con-
figurations of social relations, then predictably conflicts will be
handled differently. Quite simply, one cannot simply encourage
people to behave nonviolently or even adopt a nonviolent
mindset of how one should live one's life, as Howard (2002) has
suggested, and expect violence to end. The world will continue to
be a violent place, as indicated by the comparative evidence, until
there are changes in the interpersonal structures of the social
landscape. Changing the culture of violence in general, or the spe-
cific beliefs of those who engage in violence, represents one
approach to dealing with the problem of violence against women.
The current article has argued, however, that more widespread
and lasting solutions require a concerted effort to address the
structural conditions that perpetuate violence at the
interpersonal and even societal level.

The argument developed here suggests that insufficient atten-
tion has been paid to key explanatory factors deduced from the
comparative literature. The typical self-report surveys, such as
those implemented in Canada and the United States in recent
years, have failed to measure the key structural factors identified.
As a result, the explanatory models used to predict the presence
or extent of violent encounters between intimate partners tend to
be quite weak. For example, the 1999 GSS captures reasonably
well a variety of measures of violence and abuse involving differ-
ent types of familial and caregiving relationships. Any efforts to

explain the self-reported violence using the available measures (or independent variables in logistic regression equations), however, are quite limited, and the models have rather weak explanatory power (Michalski, 2002; cf. Brownridge, 2002; Bunge, 2000). Most researchers have focused on the individuals involved and their demographic characteristics as the potential predictors of violence rather than examining the social structure of the relationships involved.

The challenge now becomes that of developing a broader range of structural measures to evaluate the key dimensions of partners' relationships with each other and their relative access to extended networks and community locations. The social networks within which relationships are embedded require special attention, especially the degree of social isolation experienced by both partners and the degree to which their respective networks are mutually interdependent or integrated. The issue of violence does not necessarily reduce to a question of poverty as such but rather, the relative distribution of resources within relationships, including the equality of access to and control of resources. More systematic measures of intimacy or relational distance between partners and their social networks are important as well as some assessment of the degree of cultural distance among the principals involved. The degree of centralization of authority appears to be relevant to domestic violence, and access to alternative dispute resolution mechanisms may lessen the likelihood of violence occurring. Based on the limited explanatory power of current risk models and a cursory exploration of comparative evidence, these appear to be among the most important structural features that need to be investigated to answer more fully the question of why rates of intimate partner violence may change over time.

NOTE

1. Although these data stem from the 179 police forces in six provinces using the Revised Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR-II), representing nearly half (48%) of the national volume of reported crime, the data cannot be claimed to be fully representative of all regions of the country, and hence national estimates or rates of occurrence are not possible (see Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2001).

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