

AN ECOSYSTEMIC VIEW OF FAMILY VIOLENCE

Douglas G. Flemons

ABSTRACT

Family therapists have been criticized by some feminist theorists for their orientation toward spouse and child abuse. It has been asserted that a relational understanding of family violence results in the abused being blamed for acts which are clearly the responsibility of the abuser. This paper argues that while we surely must avoid the trap of "blaming the victim," we must also beware the lure of simply blaming the "victimizer." Both views separate abuser and abused within a dichotomous logic of attribution. An epistemology which separates self and other is a breeding ground for exploitation and engenders solutions of dismemberment. Connective (contextual) solutions require an ecosystemic approach that pays heed to the recursive nature of relationship.

Mastery as the remedy becomes the poison.

—Edward Sampson

Soon after Alfred Hitchcock's film *Notorious* begins, a drunk and angry Ingrid Bergman takes a man she has just met (Cary Grant) for a high-speed drive. She wishes to "wipe the smirk" off his face. When stopped by a patrolman for her reckless swerving, she responds to him in a caustic, offhand way. But before the man can arrest her, Cary Grant passes him his I.D.; the officer salutes and leaves. Bergman realizes that her passenger is some sort of "cop" and, feeling betrayed, demands that he get out of her car. He coolly tells her to move over so that he can drive. She insists he get out. He tells her to move over. She struggles with him, yelling and attempting to hit him with her fists. He responds by hitting her across the head, knocking her unconscious. . . . *The audience cheers. . . .*

Notorious came out in 1946, but the audience is contemporary: The screening was held in the fall of 1987 on a university campus in Texas. Why did the audience cheer? Misogyny? It was not as if Cary Grant was finally triumphing over a strong and evil opponent. He was hitting a drunk woman who felt deceived by him. Her protestations were portrayed as "irritating," and he quickly and efficiently silenced them. Violence is an effective, straightforward way of transforming a symmetrical struggle into a complementary calm. Cary Grant gained "control" of Ingrid Bergman by resorting to physical force.

Reprint requests to Douglas G. Flemons, M.A., Nova University, School of Social Sciences, Institute for Systemic Therapy, 1776 North Pine Island Road, Suite 200, Plantation, Florida 33322.

Family Therapy, Volume XVI, Number 1, 1989

Libra Publishers, Inc., 3089C Clairemont Dr., Suite 383, San Diego, CA 92117

Such violence is surprisingly common in dating relationships: Gelles and Cornell (1985) relate that between 22% and 67% of dating relationships involve some level of violence (p. 65). And it does not stop there. Some researchers assert that almost one quarter of all American couples will experience an act of violence over the course of their marriages (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Others double that figure:

It is estimated that in one out of two marriages at least one incidence of violence, probably more, will occur. In one out of five marriages the violence will be ongoing, with five or more incidents per year. At the extreme, episodes will happen monthly, weekly, or even more frequently. (Sonkin, Martin, & Walker, 1985, p. 2)

Of course abuse is not limited to couples. Gelles and Cornell (1985, p. 50) have estimated that 1.4 million children between the ages of 3 and 17 experience acts of abusive violence each year. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) found that 10% of the children in this age group in their sample performed at least one act of violence against a parent during a one-year period. The U.S. Congress suggests that the frequency of elder abuse could vary from 500,000 to 2.5 million cases annually (Gelles & Cornell, 1985, p. 103). The House Select Committee on Aging reports that 1 million, or 4%, of the elderly are abused by relatives, but because so few incidents are reported to the authorities, it considers the current estimates as only the tip of the iceberg (Hudson, 1986, p. 152).

The lack of uniformity in state reporting laws and record keeping, and definitional,¹ sampling, and methodological differences in current research make it virtually impossible to obtain accurate statistics about the extent of the problem. And because of the absence of reliable historical data, it is not possible to assess at this time whether or not family violence is getting progressively worse (Erchak, 1984). Nevertheless, it is clear that spouse, child, and elder abuse *are* problems of immense proportions. Gelles and Cornell (1985) conclude:

People are more likely to be killed, physically assaulted, hit, beat up, slapped, or spanked in their own homes by other family members than anywhere else, or by anyone else in our society. Some observers have proposed that violence in the family is more common than love. (p. 12)

¹Elizabeth Pleck (1987) defines family violence "as consisting of sexual coercion or threats or the use of intentional physical force with the aim of causing injury" (p. 4). Gelles and Cornell (1985) consider violence to be an "act carried out with intention or perceived intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person" (p. 22). Sonkin, Martin, and Walker (1985) distinguish four types of violence: physical, sexual, property, and psychological (pp. 37-38).

Does violence beget violence? The untreated abused children of today may well grow up to be the delinquents, murderers, and batterers of tomorrow (Schmitt & Kempe, 1975). Gelles and Cornell's (1985) notion of the "cycle of violence" points to a transgenerational cycling of the phenomenon:

No finding in the child abuse and violence toward children literature is more consistent than the finding that persons who observed family violence, were victims of violence, or were exposed to high levels of family violence in childhood are more likely to be abusers. . . . This does not mean that all victims of childhood violence will grow up to be abusers, nor are people who have no violence in their childhood experience immune to violent behavior as adults. But, a violent background is a significant contributor to the *likelihood* that a person will be violent toward a child. (pp. 57-58)

How can we respond? Clearly, the action we take must be properly grounded in comprehensive understanding lest we intervene in ways which further exacerbate the crisis: "Looking at a family apart from its social context is like studying the dynamics of swimming by examining a fish in a frying pan. The result is intervention without perspective" (Minuchin, 1984, p. 118). A contextual view, described by some authors as "ecosystemic" (Wilden & Wilson, 1976; Keeney, 1979), focuses on relational complexities unfolding through time. Such a perspective of family violence would include an analysis of both social and historical factors.

Feminist theorists (Bograd, 1984; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; MacKinnon & Miller, 1987; Pahl, 1985; Schechter, 1982; Straus, 1978; Walker, 1986) have been the most scrupulous in attending to this contextual necessity. Not surprisingly, the focus of their criticism has been directed toward patriarchal modes of domination. As Bograd (1984) points out, "decontextualization of the family places full responsibility for wife battering on family members while minimizing the impact of historical cultural traditions and current social institutions that maintain battering as they sanction male dominance" (p. 563).

Writing primarily about wife abuse, feminists have painted a grisly historical picture of women's suffering at the hands of their men:

History tells us that there always have been men who commit violence against women. For thousands of years, however, it was considered to be women's lot. Wives who were not beaten were considered lucky. Most simply hoped they could be good enough to minimize the danger. (Walker, 1986, p. 71)

Roman husbands had the legal right to chastise, divorce, or kill their wives (Dobash & Dobash, 1979, p. 36). Through the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, there was little objection within the community to a man's using force against his wife as long as he did not exceed certain tacit limits (Dobash & Dobash, 1979, p. 56). Sometimes the limits were more explicitly laid out. In England in 1782, Judge Buller declared that legally a husband could beat his wife so long as he did not use a stick thicker than his thumb.² This legal right was not removed until 1891 (Pahl, 1985, p. 11). Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) have proposed that in contemporary culture the marriage license is a hitting license.

Fundamental to the range of feminist theories is the assertion that "male-female relationships are structured by the unequal distribution of power based on gender. . . . Violence (such as rape or battering) is the most overt and visible form of control wielded by men as a class over women" (Bograd, 1984, p. 559). Feminists argue that within such a socially structured inequality, unequal participants are not mutually, and not equally, involved in (and therefore responsible for) maintaining the interaction (MacKinnon & Miller, 1987). Bograd (1984) believes that responsibility for abuse properly belongs *entirely* to men:

Feminist values are clear regarding the allocation of responsibility for wife battering incidents: (1) no woman deserves to be beaten; (2) men are solely responsible for their actions. (pp. 560-561)

If we are to take the ecosystemic perspective of family therapy seriously, if we are to pay heed to context, we must examine how every aspect of the system intertwines. This necessarily entails looking not only at the relationship between family and culture, but also the cyclic bond between the abuser and the abused. Erchak (1984), for example, maintains that family violence should be understood as a "systemic breakdown and runaway escalation of assertion and submission" (p. 250). Stulberg and Bobele (1987) concur: "From a cybernetic viewpoint . . . spouse abuse is interactional, involving all parts of the system in its origin and perpetuation" (p. 8). Walker (1979) has proposed a "cycle theory of violence" to account for the recursive patterns unfolding over stretches of time and which keep the abuser and the abused together:

Battered women are not constantly being abused, nor is their abuse inflicted at totally random times. One of the most striking discoveries

²This is said to be the origin of the expression "rule of thumb" (Gelles & Cornell, 1985, p. 31).

in the interviews was of a definite battering cycle that these women experience. . . .

The battering cycle appears to have three distinct phases, which vary in both time and intensity for the same couple and between different couples. These are: the tension-building phase; the explosion or acute battering incident; and the calm, loving respite. . . .

Just as brutality is associated with phase two, the third phase is characterized by extremely loving, kind, and contrite behavior by the batterer. . . . It is during this phase that the battered woman's victimization becomes complete. . . .

When she resists leaving the relationship and pleads that she really loves him, she bases her reference to the current loving phase-three behavior rather than the more painful phase-one or phase-two behavior. . . . She becomes an accomplice to her own battering. (pp. 55-69).

Erchak (1984) believes that "he doesn't stop and she doesn't leave because they are *addicted* to each other and to abuse" (p. 251). Such cybernetic conclusions are rejected outright by many feminists because they are seen as "blaming the victim": "From a feminist perspective, a systemic formulation is biased if it can be employed to implicate the battered woman or to excuse the abusive man" (Bograd, 1984, p. 561). Schechter (1982) asserts that "victim provocation theories leave sexist behavior and ideology unquestioned. They keep us scrutinizing the victim's behavior and, as a result, remove responsibility from the man, the community, and the social structures that maintain male violence" (p. 24).

This puts family therapists in a difficult position. Bateson (1971) advises that "if you want to understand some phenomenon or appearance, you must consider that phenomenon within the context of all *completed* circuits which are relevant to it" (p. 244). How can we understand the full recursion of family violence and act from this wisdom without getting caught simply blaming the victim or blaming the abuser? While feminists have correctly sensitized us to the patriarchal shell game of blaming the victim, we must beware of simply embracing the flip side of the dichotomy. Blaming the abuser is perhaps a more morally defensible position than blaming the abused, but it keeps us caught in the same dichotomous, either/or logic of attribution. Minuchin (1984), commenting on a book about incest and sexual abuse, notes that the editors draw

from a series of terrible stories of male destructiveness a program aimed at making children and women able to resist male destructiveness. I sympathize with their view. But I think that . . . their epistemology and therefore their actions maintain and support what they attack. Focusing on the male as monster makes people experience their individual sep-

aration, and perpetuates defensive aggression as a response to aggression. The goal should be to explore and improve people's interdependence. (p. 175)

The operative word is "blame." Only when we question our tendency to ascribe blame can we begin to break away from the habit of focusing on only one end of relationships. This is where violence resides, in the dichotomous logic of separation and control.

The shape of family violence is repeated in international relations and in the way we "man-handle" our environment. All are predicated on an epistemology of exploitation, and all are insane: "Any organism that destroys what it takes to be its other, not recognizing itself in that other, lays a firm foundation for self-destruction" (Sampson, 1986, p. 28). The dichotomous separation of self and other engenders addiction. Violence is a short-term solution—a quick fix—which furthers the goals of one side of the relationship at the expense of the relationship itself.

The attempt to control through violence often destroys relationships and drives women away, but men continue beating. Those who work with men who batter describe violence as easy and efficacious. Violence works in the sense that the violent person intimidates others and makes them act according to his will. Violence is practical; the violent person temporarily gets his way and he knows that he is frightening his victim. (Schechter, 1982, p. 223)

Sampson (1986) makes a similar point with regard to the relationship between people and the environment:

In the single-minded pursuit of mastery, the pursuer becomes the pursued, trapped by the very lures and snares established to catch and dominate the presumed "enemy." The very tools and institutions established in the first place to achieve mastery become the source of the new problems that humanity confronts. What is called for, therefore, is a different relationship between humanity and nature, one that partakes less of mastery and more of participation and receptivity. (pp. 35–36)

Feminists join ecologists in their understanding that healing comes about through connection and completion. In some cases it may be absolutely necessary for a woman and her children or for an elderly parent to leave an abusive situation. But if the family wishes to stay together, we may have to drop our blaming stance.

This approach might be seen as a form of coping out—letting the man off the hook and dismissing his destructive behavior with a shrug. I see it as the only rational way of dealing with family violence. . . . I cannot

support family maintenance when the family organization is destructive to its members. The goal then is to help the family separate. But if the family wants to continue as a family unit, and if I find this feasible, I must accept my responsibility to help the family change. (Minuchin, 1984, p. 177)

Bograd (1984) would take issue with this:

Family therapists sometimes appear unwilling to acknowledge that some battered women *are* innocent victims whose sole "collaboration" was standing within arm's reach of their husbands. It is only recently that some clinicians have taken a more radical position by stating that thinking systemically does not preclude the position that the husband is solely accountable for the battering incident. (p. 562)

This more "radical" position attempts to wed (justified) outrage and anger with systemic thought; however in its attempt to encapsulate blame it shackles itself to the same either/or logic of patriarchal epistemology. This only serves to maintain the exploitation. An ecological example will help to clarify this.

Imagine a manufacturing company that is found to be dumping toxic waste into a community's water supply. What should be done? Let us suppose that blame is established and affixed and the industry is heavily fined. Who pays? If the fine is too high the company will shut down operations and there will be an increase in unemployment. Suppose the community and the company settle on a "reasonable" fine. What then happens? The corporation is buffered by its insurance company, which in turn is buffered through reinsurance schemes to a vast financial network. This money is generated and maintained at an international level. So who has paid the fine? *We all have*. The cost of increased insurance premiums is then passed along to the consumer, and the company continues to skimp on safety measures in order to maintain its margin of profit. And the next ecological disaster is just waiting to occur. Who is responsible? We all are. We all benefit from the short-term benefits of industries which exploit the environment: our economic system runs on nonrenewable resources and thrives on the toxic luxury of dumping our garbage with blind "ignore-ance." By affixing blame on a single company or on industry in general we obfuscate the cybernetic nature of systemic relations and allow the exploitation to continue. However, if we take the notion of "responsibility" not as an opportunity to blame but rather as a call to action, we enable ourselves to awake from the passive stupor engendered by the label "victim."

Exploitation of an "other" destroys the connection which keeps both fully alive. A man may be able to exert physical control over a woman

for the duration of a fight, but any exercise of actual "power" is necessarily limited. The beating eventually stops. The existential *threat* of power exists at the level of the relationship, and this lies beyond the man's unilateral control. Both parties maintain the context within which the violence may occur. And herein lies the seed of a solution.

Although, perhaps, not illustrious, there *is* a history of reform. Radbill (1980) notes that child protection laws were legislated as long ago as 450 B.C. when fathers' authority over children was modified, and numerous societies have had rules and regulations governing sexual relations and sexual access to children. Pleck (1987) dates the first American attempts to intervene to the 17th century:

From 1640 to 1680, the Puritans of colonial Massachusetts enacted the first laws anywhere in the world against wife beating and "unnatural severity" to children. A second reform epoch lasted from 1874 to about 1890, when societies for the prevention of cruelty to children (SPCCs) were founded and smaller efforts on behalf of battered women and victims of incest were initiated. The third era of interest began in 1962, when five physicians published an article about "the battered child syndrome" in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. In the early 1970s, the women's liberation movement rediscovered wife beating and, somewhat later, marital rape. Since then many other types of family violence, from abuse of the elderly to sibling violence, have come to light. (p. 4)

Feminist visions of reform are often politically far-reaching. Schechter (1982), for example, believes that "since male supremacy is the historical source of battering, and class domination perpetuates male privilege, a long-range plan to end abuse includes a total restructuring of society that is feminist, anti-racist, and socialist" (pp. 238–239).

What can family therapists do now? Bowker (1983) conducted 136 in-depth interviews with women who stayed with their husbands and succeeded in getting them to stop using violence. Their techniques clustered into three types: (1) personal strategies, including talking, promising, threatening, hiding, passive defense, aggressive defense, and avoidance; (2) use of informal help sources, including family members, in-laws, neighbors, friends, and shelters; and (3) formal help sources, including the police, social service agencies, and lawyers and district attorneys. Although no single strategy is guaranteed to stop violence, Bowker believes that what matters is the woman's demonstration of her determination that the violence must stop now (cited in Gelles & Cornell, 1985, p. 79). It is necessary for all of us to create contexts which preclude exploitation, and to do this without simply reapplying the same coercive formulas to those who coerce (Stulberg & Bobele, 1987).

We know so much, but we apply our knowledge so poorly. Our chief remedy for violence is a prime example: we control, which engenders violence, which engenders control. (Minuchin, 1984, p. 190)

Noncoercive intervention will often mean working with everyone involved in an abusive relationship, despite the protestations of feminists such as Bograd (1984): "The very structure of conjoint therapy takes the focus off the husband and suggests that his battering is a problem of the couple" (p. 565). Battering is a problem of the couple as long as they remain a couple. Encapsulating blame restricts one to solutions of dismemberment (Minuchin, 1984). Appreciating cybernetic responsibility opens the way to the connective solutions which lie at the heart of the ecosystemic epistemology of family therapy.

REFERENCES

- Bateson, G. (1971). A systems approach. *International Journal of Psychiatry*, 9, 242-244.
- Bograd, M. (1984). Family systems approaches to wife battering: A feminist critique. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 54(4), 558-568.
- Bowker, L. H. (1983). *Beating wife-beating*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Dobash, E. R., & Dobash, R. (1979). *Violence against wives: A case against the patriarchy*. New York: The Free Press.
- Erchak, G. M. (1984). The escalation and maintenance of spouse abuse: A cybernetic model. *Victimology: An International Journal*, 9(2), 247-253.
- Gelles, R. J., & Cornell, C. P. (1985). *Intimate violence in families*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hudson, M. F. (1986). Elder mistreatment: Current research. In K. A. Pillemer & R. S. Wolf (Eds.), *Elder abuse* (pp. 125-166). Dover, MA: Auburn House.
- Keeney, B. P. (1979). Ecosystemic epistemology: An alternative paradigm for diagnosis. *Family Process*, 18, 117-129.
- MacKinnon, L. K., & Miller, D. (1987). The new epistemology and the Milan approach: Feminist and sociopolitical considerations. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 13, 139-155.
- Minuchin, S. (1984). *Family kaleidoscope*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pahl, J. (Ed.). (1985). *Private violence and public policy*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Pleck, E. (1987). *Domestic tyranny*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Radbill, S. (1980). A history of child abuse and infanticide. In R. Helfer & C. Kempe (Eds.), *The battered child* (3rd ed., pp. 3-20). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sampson, E. E. (1986). The inversion of mastery. *Cybernetic*, 2, 26-39.
- Schechter, S. (1982). *Women and male violence*. Boston: South End Press.
- Schmitt, B., & Kempe, C. H. (1975). Neglect and abuse of children. In V. Vaughn & R. McKay (Eds.), *Nelson textbook of pediatrics*. Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders.

- Sonkin, D. J., Martin, D., & Walker, L. E. A. (1985). *The male batterer*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Straus, M. A. (1978). Wife beating: How common and why. In J. Eekelar & S. Katz (Eds.), *Family violence*. Toronto: Butterworths.
- Straus, M. A., Gelles, R., & Steinmetz, S. K. (1980). *Behind closed doors: Violence in the American family*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press.
- Stulberg, T., & Bobele, M. (1987). *Spouse abuse: An ecosystemic approach*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Walker, L. E. A. (1979). *The battered woman*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Walker, L. E. A. (1986). Psychological causes of family violence. In M. Lystad (Ed.), *Violence in the home: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 71-97). New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Wilden, A., & Wilson, T. (1976). The double bind: Logic, magic and economics. In C. Sluzki & D. Ransom (Eds.), *Double bind: The foundation of the communicational approach to the family*. New York: Grune and Stratton.