
An Integrative Feminist Model

The Evolving Feminist Perspective on Intimate Partner Violence

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The feminist perspective on intimate partner violence is a predominant model in the field, although not immune to criticism. In this research, frontline workers in the violence against women movement responded to critiques of the feminist model. The project used a focus group and a modified grounded theory analysis. Participants agreed with some criticisms, including an overreliance on a punitive criminal justice system, but reported skepticism toward proposed alternatives. Findings led to the development of the *Integrative Feminist Model*, which expands the feminist perspective in response to critiques, new research, and alternative theories while retaining a gendered analysis of violence.

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Since the early 1970s, the feminist perspective has been one of the predominant theoretical models in the domestic violence field, undergirding many programs, interventions, advocacy efforts, and legislative agendas. However, since its inception, the feminist model has been subjected to challenge. Although academicians engage in heated debates on this issue in scholarly journals, those working on the front lines of the violence against women movement, that is, shelter workers, domestic violence service providers, and counselors in batterer intervention programs, are often excluded from these conversations. This research project solicited the perspectives of service providers about external critiques of the feminist model as well their own observations from working directly with clients involved in abusive situations.

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We began our project by asking the following questions. What do frontline workers in agencies that work in the domestic violence arena, many of whom practice and were trained in a feminist model, think about the critiques of the feminist model as well as accusations of an overreliance on the criminal justice system? Do their experiences and practice resonate with the feminist model or critiques of that model? Can critiques influence frontline practice? Which elements of the critique, if any, might be incorporated into practice and theory?

A focus group was convened to allow participants to respond to a critique of the feminist approach to domestic violence. Data were collected and analyzed using a modified grounded theory methodology. A new model, the Integrative Feminist Model (IFM), emerged from the project findings. IFM incorporates parts of the critique, rejects other critique components, while holding firm to a feminist analysis of violence.

The Feminist Model and Critiques

The feminist model is grounded in the principle that intimate partner violence is the result of male oppression of women within a patriarchal system in which men are the primary perpetrators of violence and women the primary victims (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Walker, 1979). According to the model, male violence within intimate relationships results from historic and current power differentials that keep women subordinate, primarily through the use of control, including physical, sexual, economic, and psychological abuse, comprising tactics of intimidation and isolation (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project [DAIP], n.d.). Male entitlement, and the violence used to sustain it, is often attributed to male socialization (Miedzian, 1991) with the implicit understanding that what is learned can be unlearned. The feminist model challenges male entitlement and privilege as well as the traditional notion that domestic violence is a private family matter. Thus, feminists demand public solutions, including the establishment of programs and services for women who are battered, treatment for their male partners, and the involvement of the criminal justice system to hold men accountable for their violence. Feminists believe that many of the problems faced by women, including violence, are caused by social, cultural, and political forces requiring action at the policy level. This belief is encapsulated in the feminist mantra, “the personal is political.” This orientation decries earlier attempts to craft private solutions for the collective problem of violence against women. The feminist model also acknowledges the strength, resilience, and agency of women and strives toward the goals of female empowerment and self-determination.

The feminist model further evolved with the integration of two additional vital components. First, although feminist perspectives are multiple (Saulnier, 1996), early feminist perspectives primarily focused on gender as a category for analysis.

However, through the work of feminists of color, international feminists, and lesbian feminists, the feminist perspective on domestic violence (as well as other topics of interest to feminists) acknowledges the importance of looking at the intersections between gender and other systems of oppression, such as race, class, national origin, sexual orientation, age, and disability (Collins, 2000). Second, same-sex partner violence was acknowledged (Renzetti, 1988, 1997) and incorporated into programs and the literature, although seemingly not fully integrated into the feminist *theoretical* perspective.

In contrast to the feminist perspective, alternate models of theorizing and addressing intimate partner violence abound. Chornesky (2000) listed three major theoretical explanations for domestic violence other than feminism: psychological, sociological, and neurobiological. Under these broader categories fall more specific explanations for intimate partner violence: male shame, men feeling powerlessness rather than powerful, intergenerational transmission of violent behavioral strategies, psychopathology and personality disorders, substance abuse, negative self-concepts, male proprietariness, ineffective couple communication skills, poor anger management skills, attachment disorders, childhood abuse and/or neglect, poverty, and family conflict rooted in the everyday stresses of family life. Some approaches combine theoretical models. For instance, Danis (2003) noted that multiple theories are used to undergird criminal justice interventions including social exchange and/or deterrence, social learning, feminist, and ecological frameworks. Heise (1998) adopted an ecological approach to understanding gender-based violence, namely, recognizing the multifaceted nature of violence and the interplay among personal, situational, and sociocultural factors.

Over the years, the feminist framework has been a primary target of criticism from academics, practitioners, and others. Paradoxically, the domestic violence movement has in some ways become a victim of its own legitimization as the latest round of criticisms has focused on a perceived overreliance on the criminal justice system to aggressively intervene in such cases (Maguigan, 2003; McDermott & Garofalo, 2004; Mills, 2003; Ms. Foundation of Women [MFW], 2003; Renzetti, 1998), particularly around the topics of mandatory arrest and prosecution.

Although a criminal justice response was one element in the feminist strategy to make "private" violence a public matter, it is important not to conflate a reliance on the criminal justice system with the feminist perspective. For instance, Walker's (1979) influential and early work called for a "multilevel, systemic approach" (p. 186), which included an end to sex role stereotyping and establishment of "safe houses" as well as legal remedies. Because the feminist perspective has included the involvement of the criminal justice system, critiques of that system are often laid at the door of the feminist perspective. In fact, even feminists themselves question the scope of the criminal justice system's involvement in all domestic violence cases, as demonstrated by MFW's (2003) report, *Safety and Justice for All*, which explored community-based alternatives to current criminal justice policies.

Other detractors have been more broadly critical of the entire feminist paradigm:

The assumptions underpinning mainstream feminist advocacy efforts is that all intimate abuse is heterosexual, that violence is a one-way street (male to female), that all violence warrants a state response, and that women want to leave rather than stay in their abusive relationships. (Mills, 2003, p. 6-7)

Academics have reacted to Mills's assessment with a critical evaluation of her arguments (Coker, 2004; Raphael, 2004; Stark, 2004). This study builds on these discussions by adding frontline domestic violence workers' responses to a critique of the feminist paradigm.

Method

In this project, researchers conducted a focus group to respond to a critique of the feminist model. A focus group is a qualitative data collection method that involves bringing a group of homogeneous participants together with a moderator to discuss a particular topic or issue (Berg, 2003). Focus groups are advantageous in that they allow for generative interactions between participants and yield a good deal of information in a timely and cost-effective manner (Berg, 2003). This research included the involvement of a community agency, a nonprofit organization that serves survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, which operates primarily within the feminist model.

Although a number of critiques of the feminist model are available, Linda Mills's (2003) critique, as outlined in her book, *Insult to Injury: Rethinking Our Responses to Intimate Abuse*, was selected for use in this research for its timeliness and comprehensive scope as well as the mainstream media attention its publication has generated. Mills's writing has also generated controversy within academic circles (Coker, 2004; Raphael, 2004; Stark, 2004) and lively discussion. Some of the limitations of Mills's argument have been noted in the literature. Raphael (2004) concluded that Mills's work is "a gratuitous attack on the field" that fails "to acknowledge the many experts already working to establish more nuanced responses that are less reliant on arrest and incarceration. Mills constructs straw women . . . demolishing such straw women is not difficult" (p. 1355). However, despite its shortcomings, the work opened the door to examining criticisms of the feminist model.

Participants received a copy of the book two months before the focus group meeting and also viewed a brief PowerPoint presentation that outlined the book's major points prior to the discussion. The facilitators asked participants to make a list of topics they would like to address and then opened the floor for discussion. The session lasted three hours with the last half-hour devoted to summarization and defining next steps.

Sample

The sample was recruited with an e-mail solicitation sent by an administrative employee of the collaborating agency. The e-mail was also sent to several other agencies that work with victims, survivors, and perpetrators of intimate partner violence. Seemingly characteristic of the e-mail process, the invitation was frequently forwarded to other interested parties. The invitation noted that a discussion of Mills's critique would be held, participants would be asked to read the critique prior to meeting, and a focus group would be convened to respond to the critique.

This method of nonprobability sampling, a purposive sampling method that evolved into snowball sampling, yielded a sample of 33 participants from eight agencies. Participants included 32 women and one man. Ages of participants ranged from early 20s to early 60s. Eighty percent ($n = 26$) of the participants were White and 20% ($n = 7$) were people of color, including Latinas, African Americans, and Southeast Asians. Experience in the family violence field ranged from 2 years to more than 20. Two women identified as having disabilities. The sexual identity and theoretical orientation of each participant were not elicited, although some voluntarily identified as feminists, and one participant explicitly stated that she was not a feminist. The majority of the participants were from the collaborating agency. Other agencies represented included batterers intervention programs, a family violence advocacy organization, and programs offering specialized services for deaf survivors of domestic violence. The session was originally limited to 30 participants, and a short waiting list formed. Frontline workers seemed eager to be part of this discussion.

Data Analysis

Because the research questions were exploratory in nature, qualitative methodology using modified grounded theory techniques was chosen. Grounded theory examines textual data, systematically gathered and analyzed, to develop theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), "*Theory denotes a set of well-developed categories (e.g., themes, concepts) that are systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, educational, nursing, or other phenomenon*" (p. 22, italics in original).

The focus group session was audiotaped and transcribed. Line-by-line open coding of data ensued, and the data were organized into properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data were analyzed along two dimensions: process and content. The process piece was most consistent with Glaser's (1978) formulation of a basic social process, whereas the content piece yielded the IFM. Three methods of enhancing the rigor and trustworthiness of the data were used: member checking, peer debriefing and support, and establishing an audit trail (Padgett, 1998).

The findings are *grounded* with the use of direct quotes from participants. To be representative in selecting comments for inclusion, we have reported all responses that represented diverse thought, actions, or decisions associated with the research questions. The research findings can be divided into two sections: process and content results.

Process Findings: Responding to the Critiques

Focus group participants appeared to respond to the ideological critique in four stages of what Glaser (1978) defined as a basic social process. Basic social processes are “fundamental patterns in the organization of social behavior as it occurs over time” (p. 106). Criteria for basic social processes include having a minimum of at least two stages, processes must occur over time, change over time, and stages must be perceivable.

Stage 1: Defending the Model and Challenging the Critique

The first stage was characterized by a defensive tone and superficial reactions to the critique. Two characteristic types of statements included defending the feminist model and challenging the external critique. Some illustrative examples include the following:

One thing she assumes that whoever she calls the mainstream feminists, I don't think I have met them, but one thing she assumes is that they don't listen to the victim or survivor and that assumption is very questionable, because in my experience that is all that we do.

She's out of tune with us anyway. Very.

Most objected to Mills's use of the term *mainstream feminists* as well her assertion that countertransference accounts for the feminist perspective on intimate partner violence. Mills (2003) attributed feminist interventions in domestic violence, which she strongly criticizes, to domestic violence workers/activists/scholars projecting their unresolved issues about violence onto women who are abused. As a whole, participants found this characterization both insulting and inaccurate.

Stage 2: Opening Up to the Critique

The next stage consisted of a perceptible shift in process and content. Moving from a defensive reaction to a deeper process, the group conversation began to open up space for an in-depth assessment of the critique. Some examples include the following:

I think it's very important that we do look at ourselves and that we challenge ourselves. We try to in the counseling department, and we try to as an agency, too.

I think that we're not helping people enough . . . we're called upon to be professionals, to dig deeper, to go further, and I think we can and I think that means that we have to do some of the things that she asks us to do. And if I'm defensive against something that's a cue for me, that's something I need to look at. If I'm having an emotional response to a topic, and I'm feeling angry, it's something I need to look at.

At this stage, the service providers appeared reflective and open to examining their practice and model.

Stage 3: Considering and Assessing the Critique

Participants began to debate the arguments presented in the critique, recognizing strengths and weaknesses, voicing what resonated and what did not. The participants' practice experiences provided evidence to both support and reject portions of the critique. Statements were at times tentative and qualified before participants expressed a potentially controversial opinion. For example, participants made statements such as: "There's a lot of things I disagree with in her book and the way she says things, but . . ." and "I actually was not extremely offended by this reading, and I'm kind of nervous to come in here like maybe I should be offended." Many comments reflected the inconsistencies and tensions between assumptions of the feminist model and the realities that participants experience in their day-to-day practice, which they perhaps had not previously voiced publicly; for example, the problem of female aggression. The responses of this stage comprise the majority of the content results and will be presented later.

Stage 4: Incorporating the Critique Into a New Model

In the final stage, focus group members expressed a desire for a more flexible paradigm that responded to issues raised in the critique and in their own practice. Participants struggled with the implications of wholesale changes to the feminist model. They wanted to be able to retain useful elements of the model (i.e., the empowerment of women, addressing gender inequalities), while exploring new avenues for theory and practice. They also expressed concerns that alternatives, such as the restorative justice model, might produce unintended and potentially harmful consequences for victims of domestic violence. Thus, the shift to an integrative model was viewed cautiously. Some ideas were accepted, whereas others were viewed with concern or rejected outright. Benefits were seen, as well as potential losses.

I don't think things are getting better, and we need a better model. We need to go at this some different way. As hard as we're trying, we're not being successful and hard as we're trying, domestic violence, I don't think things are getting better.

Participants also expressed excitement about addressing limitations in the feminist model. The energy, excitement, and willingness to discuss the feminist model and the external critique were palpable in the room.

Changing cautiously. Participants struggled with whether there was a need to make changes to the feminist model. When participants talked about amending the model, they did so with some trepidation. For example, concern was expressed that changes in practice and policy could only occur with much oversight, and questions were raised about who would provide the oversight and how much overseers would know about the dynamics of intimate partner violence. Fears were expressed that change could provide an opening or opportunity to move backward. Skepticism of the external critique seemed to emerge from a firsthand knowledge of the dynamics of abuse, the community, and culture, rather than from ideological inflexibility. For instance, concern was repeatedly raised about alternative dispensations outside the criminal justice system, such as Mills's proposed Intimacy Abuse Circles (IACs), which are groups made up of family, friends, and appropriate community members working within a restorative justice model to hold the perpetrator accountable.

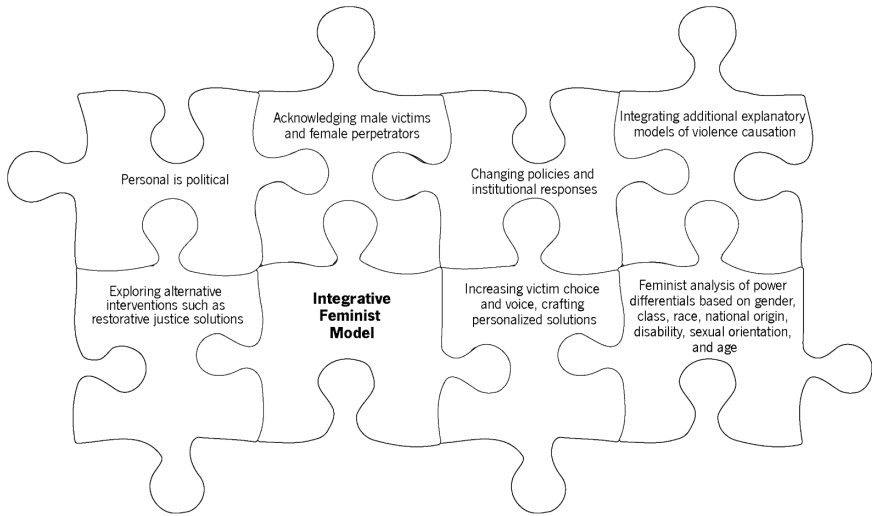
I think that her idea of the IAC is a good idea, it's just, maybe it's just unimaginable because a lot of families are not very healthy to start off with, their religion is not very healthy to start off with, so I think it's not that simple, it's not that simple to create a community when it has too many ills in it already.

How do we ensure that there truly is a community whose point of care is in line with the person who is being, who is being victimized as opposed to a community that might have cultural beliefs and attitudes that would support certain types of violence?

This has come up a couple of times to talk about other solutions, other than just the criminal justice system solution, just the criminal justice kind of cookie cutter response, and I think that we are doing that in lots of ways. I know that we said no mediations in domestic violence civil cases, and what I'm seeing in my experience is that legal system is very oppressive and that actually mediation, when it's done properly and if the power is distributed well, it's possible to give some control back to someone who didn't have it, and who's not going to have it before the judge who is going to have all the power. And so that her IAC, I see that as a criminal parallel to mediation where they are saying instead of just handing it over to a judge, you can sort of craft your own solution.

One participant cited examples from another country and culture in which family interventions had been successful in holding the perpetrator responsible for the violence, while also citing examples where families blamed and punished the victim for the violence. Another participant noted her involvement in a mediation where the father of the perpetrator refused to have his son's guns confiscated and the criminal charge focused on property damage to a car, without acknowledging that the perpetrator was hitting the car with a baseball bat while the female victim was inside. Although interested and willing to consider alternatives, participants

Figure 1
Integrative Feminist Model for Intimate Partner Violence



were also cautious, primarily around two issues: (a) the safety of the client and (b) concern that communities are not knowledgeable enough to participate in a process of holding someone responsible for their violence.

Integrative Feminist Model

Moving from the analysis of the process to content led to the development of the IFM. The IFM builds on and expands the traditional feminist response to domestic violence. See Figure 1.

The structure of the model is that of a puzzle, where interlocking theoretical pieces fit together. The metaphor of a puzzle is apt, because pieces must fit with each other in order for the complete picture to emerge. Not all theoretical elements can be incorporated into the feminist model—you cannot fit a square peg into a round hole. The hallmark of the IFM is its commitment to locating the roots of violence within gender (and other forms of) oppression. This feminist ideology forms the central piece of the puzzle, whereas other puzzle pieces provide greater detail and context, helping us understand the many forms that domestic violence can take. This model illustrates the shifts and expansions in thinking expressed by the focus group participants without violating core feminist values.

Retaining a Feminist Analysis

Participants were willing to take steps to modify the feminist model while not completely abandoning it. For instance, one participant said, “Add that piece, maybe not taking away the stuff we already do, but I think a piece is missing.” Participants wanted to build on the successes of the feminist perspective and continue to address gender inequities that were still viewed as highly relevant and problematic. Some participants expressed concern that agreement with parts of the critique could be construed as antifeminist and worried about the potential for backlash in a political climate that is perceived as hostile to feminism.

I wanted to address a little bit about why this book has gotten so much attention, and I’ve seen a whole series of books that are not particularly well written or researched get this type of attention, and it’s almost always because they are attacking feminism.

To write in this tone to mainstream feminists and not to the system that the feminists had to deal with in order to become mainstream is really a deep, deep flaw, and I think that’s what got her [Mills] on Oprah.

I want to say one of the challenges is to have these conversations or critiques in a way that’s not used against us politically because I think that’s what people’s fear is about even broaching this because they’re scared about funding, how people use those words against you to minimize problems. When I worked in reproductive rights, it’s like the abortion issue, a lot of feminist issues, it’s why it’s so difficult to have these conversations because you don’t even want to give an inch.

The part of the feminist model that participants most valued and the central piece of our model is the focus on the political and structural problems that affect people at the personal level. Concern was voiced that without the feminist focus on structural issues, the problem of domestic violence would return to the realm of interpersonal relationships, where a power analysis is often absent. The feminist perspective was also credited by participants with connecting violence to larger sociocultural issues, such as racism, classism, and poverty.

I think we cannot ignore the societal level, and I’m not just talking about going out and giving a presentation on prevention, not that I’m knocking that, I do that, but I’m talking about radical fundamental change because people are not going to have choices where there is poverty, as long as there is racism and other forms of discrimination, as long as people’s choices are so extremely narrow and their resources are so limited. So I’m talking about radical political change.

And the other thing that I’m struggling with here is that I’m very concerned about the social justice piece, when is it going to be shameful to be someone who is abusive, when are we going to change the culture?

In sum, participants wanted to expand the feminist model while retaining its fundamental aspects; that is, to avoid throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Acknowledging Multiple Causes of Violence

The feminist model focuses on patriarchal privilege and the oppression of women as the primary cause of violence against women. Participants were interested in expanding the perspective to encompass alternative theories of violence. At times, these additional theories narrowed the focus to personal etiologies of violence and at times challenged traditional feminist theory to be more inclusive of other oppressions.

She [Mills] goes on to talk about the abusers and the factors, like attachment theory and past abuse, and a lot of times we ask that question: "Well, why do they abuse?" and I've had supervisors that have not liked me asking about abusers, that you know, oh no, you talk about the woman.

I'm not a feminist myself, and I don't know what I would label myself, I want to find a way to do my research and stop violence against not only women but also children, and anybody. Violence does not discriminate on race, sex, gender, color, nothing.

I believe we are moving beyond seeing this as a movement of violence against women to address violence against any vulnerable person or population.

A number of participants expressed interest in psychodynamic and interpersonal theories to supplement the sociopolitical frameworks that the feminist model relies on to account for male violence against women.

Nature versus nurture causations of human aggression. However, although many participants were willing to question their understanding of violence as the consequence of patriarchal privilege, there was greater resistance to the idea that violence is innate and human, as Mills (2003) suggested. This resistance appeared to be less a defense of feminist ideology and more about a reluctance to accept human nature as inherently violent. Viewing violence as a more complex problem in which every person has a propensity for violence stands in stark contrast with the emphasis of the feminist model on eradicating culturally learned and structurally supported male violence. Participants struggled with whether the goal of eradicating interpersonal violence was an achievable one.

Thus, the shift to a new model for some represented adopting a new, and seemingly more pessimistic, worldview in which violence is inevitable. This worldview all but discards the notion that there can be a violence-free world, which is often an implicit goal of feminist work. Participants considered the inevitability argument.

Indeed, I do think that violence is inevitable, it is genetically coded into us as human beings, as much as I would like to see it stop. . . . I mean if we look at the global picture what we are doing in Iraq, Afghanistan, things that were done to us. It is often quite depressing, to work on some individual level of violence, when there is so much violence occurring in the world, but it does seem inevitable.

I want to respond to the question about the inevitability of violence and how I think she sees it and how I'd like to see it used. Which is it's not so much to say it's inevitable, therefore forget it, but it's inevitable, therefore we can never turn away from it.

Participants seemed to resolve this dichotomy by adopting a both/and position, that is, that violence is both innate and learned.

Acknowledging the Female Role in Violence

The participants agreed that the evolution of the feminist model must address the fact that women can be perpetrators as well as victims of violence; that women can and do verbally, emotionally, sexually, and physically abuse male and female partners as well as their children. Acknowledging female violence places feminists in an uncomfortable position because female aggression, even in self-defense, has been used by perpetrators and society to blame victims and minimize the scope of violence against women. However, participants struggled to understand the etiology of female aggression as well as to hold them accountable for their violence in appropriate ways.

Anyone who has wanted to read the research over the last 20 years, it's quite evident that women are aggressive and violent, and I can remember, this is somewhat historical, but developing an instrument that asks women if they were violent was highly criticized, that why are you even asking that question?

One of her ideas that I found very compelling and stimulating was her demand that we look at female aggression. I do want to say that I agree that we must move beyond the paradigm of looking at this strictly as male as the abuser, has all the power, does all the abuse, woman is the victim. And I believe at [our agency], with many of my colleagues we are moving beyond that paradigm. I think this is a very useful discussion because I still hear vestiges of that paradigm within these walls, I still hear people refer to that we serve battered women, I still hear that a lot when I'm in the community educating.

There's a profound need for us in this society to look at the different ways that women's aggression and anger manifest is different than the ways than it does for men.

Because women's aggression has not been well explained by the feminist model, participants' statements are revealing when they speak of the difficulties faced by frontline workers operating solely within the feminist model when attempting to explain female aggression.

How am I addressing it when a woman tells me that I've been violent that I've stabbed somebody? And I'm thinking, well, actually you're just a victim of patriarchy and the reason is that you're defending yourself, and they're telling me, "No I was violent." Am I really hearing, am I really listening? She's asking me to listen deeper, more deeper, when it conflicts with my view of what I want to see and how I operate inside a model.

I think you can have a female, person of color, homosexual, with a disability, whatever, could be internalizing the patriarchal oppressor.

As these quotes illustrate, within the feminist model, physically aggressive women are typically told that they are “just defending [themselves]” or “internalizing the patriarchal oppressor.” Although women do self-defend as well as imitate violence that has been perpetrated against them, in many ways these justifications did not sit well with either the counselor or the client. One participant stated, “I feel very strongly with the need to have more complex survivor stories.” Because the traditional feminist model is limited in its ability to explain female aggression, some participants felt that the minimization of female violence often precludes the development of more complex stories.

Participants also wanted to examine the role of women’s behaviors in perpetuating violence within their relationships more broadly, including challenging some women’s successive relationships with different abusive men. Again, participants approached the idea of looking at women’s role in abusive relationships tentatively.

There are dynamics of abuse because it’s not one person they’re leaving that’s abusive; it’s one after the other, after the other, after the other, after the other, and it’s like it’s difficult to even talk about that out loud, in public or even here.

Same-sex couple violence is also weakly explained by the feminist model. Over time, same-sex violence has been increasingly included in the antiviolence movement yet is still not well integrated in terms of theory, often presented as an aside or afterthought. In fact, the topic did not arise in the focus group session. However, the participants did seem to find a way to retain a feminist perspective by seeing individuals as responding to oppressive social structures in ways that were violent, even when the perpetrator was also a member of an oppressed group.

Recognizing Client Loss of Choice and Self-Determination

In Mills’s critique, feminist practices were criticized as having unintended consequences that ultimately reduced victim and/or survivor choice and undermined their self-determination within the criminal justice system. Participants generally supported increased choice for victims and/or survivors while acknowledging the painful reality of limited and difficult choices.

Do we trust survivors to make that choice at that time? Because we haven’t, we’ve taken that choice away from them. And sometimes they appreciate that 5 years later, and sometimes they don’t. So that’s a very unempowering thing to do.

If there’s a number of pathways that people have choice, some people might choose a strictly criminal justice process, other people might choose based on either, “I’m afraid

of that person,” or “I want to be back with that person, I want to see our family together,” so it seems like to me multiple choices for people is a good answer to that where we leave it in their hands, what choice they choose among numerous tracks.

The integration of the feminist model recognizes that although core feminist values include choice, self-determination, and empowerment, the battered women’s movement compromised some of these core values, often in an attempt to hold the perpetrator accountable within the criminal justice system. Often the desires of individual victims conflict with the concerns about community safety. This tension between micro and macro imperatives will continue to exist and be mediated by the constructive work of domestic violence advocates attempting to resolve the disparities at these levels of intervention.

Concerns about choice. Participants also struggled with the dilemmas involved in increasing survivors’ choices, noting that it was often a “double-edged sword.” One participant noted how difficult it might be for a traumatized individual in crisis to make the best decision for herself: “I see people that I feel like don’t have the capacity to make those choices not, not incompetent, it’s just that they have so many other factors.” Another participant described how victims who have been made to feel responsible for their own abuse fear being blamed for exacting the perpetrator’s punishment as well. As the participant suggested, when legal action becomes the unwanted responsibility of the victim, the result may be further isolation of the victim.

They feel already that already they are blamed by the perpetrator that she is the reason for them getting punishment, and so if the choice is back on her, then she will be blamed all the time and then probably there will be no intervention.

Rejection of feminist power that overrides choice. Central to Mills’s argument is the belief that “mainstream” feminists have achieved great power in determining practice and policy in the domestic violence arena, often to the detriment of victims, survivors, and perpetrators. However, participants identified much more with their disempowered clients than the powerful, “mainstream” feminists that Mills describes.

She [Mills] assumes that mainstream feminists are still in control.

She [Mills] seems to think that there is still this entity called mainstream feminists who are still in charge of this system and that they have lots of power. I wish I was one of them and that they’re still around as a body and still propagating these ideas rather than there was just this moment when they met the patriarchy and made some concessions.

Ironically, frontline workers seemed to believe that both clients and workers had limited power and few choices; that both workers and clients were caught up in systems that allowed little voice and few options.

Acknowledging Institutional Failures

One of the major criticisms by Mills (2003) is that the violence against women movement overrelies on its partnership with the criminal justice system, which has often had negative and unintended consequences for women. Participants had strong opinions and, for the most part, agreed with this aspect of the critique.

I think that the system that we have now, and I helped develop it to some small degree, it hasn't gone, at least the way I wanted to see it happen. There's not as many choices in that as I thought there would be. And much more punitive in nature than I thought it would be, and less fair than I thought it would be.

Because it's [the criminal justice system] is unpredictable, unreliable. . . . If I could just get a divorce and move and get a new job, that is a much more appealing choice to me than to have to go to tell the police about what happened, get him into whatever kind of treatment program. . . . CPS could get involved, I could lose my kids, I could be ordered to go to counseling and tell these people things about my life that I don't want to tell them, I mean, there's all those things. But if I have the option not to enter into the system, legal criminal justice system, if I have the choice not to enter into it, I would choose not to, and so that's upsetting to me. That this is the option I'm giving the people who come to me, but I would not take this option myself, and that feels bad.

Criticism of the criminal justice system by frontline workers resonates with the criticisms presented in the academic literature. However, a participant noted that although the criminal justice system can be overzealous, it is not uniformly so and can also underreact, even in cases of serious abuse. An important piece of an evolving feminist model is the realization and acknowledgment that some of the systems that assist women in violent relationships have had unintended negative consequences. However, frontline workers were skeptical about whether proposed alternatives, such as community accountability or restorative justice models, would adequately safeguard abused women and their children.

Discussion

This study provided the opportunity for frontline workers to respond to a critique of the feminist model as well as examine discrepancies between the feminist perspective on domestic violence and their own practice experiences. As Lipsky (1980) noted, there is often a demonstrable gap between the "law on the books" and the implementation of "law on the ground." Lipsky considers the disconnect that occurs between policy directives and the pragmatic implementations of public policy as an inherent condition of bureaucracies. A similar disconnect between *ideology on the books* and the implementation of an *ideology on the ground* in the domestic violence arena exists and may not be too surprising as agencies that address

domestic violence largely moved from grassroots organizations to more established bureaucracies. Moreover, as the complexity of intimate partner violence and the inadequacies of current practice models are revealed, the evolution, expansion, and integration of theory is necessary to guide and support domestic violence programs and policy.

The voices of frontline workers as well as scholarly debates, research findings, voices of victims and/or survivors, and critiques of the last decade should inform this integrative process. This synthesis, visually presented in the IFM, is viewed as a work in progress. In this discussion, we build on the frontline experiences as expressed by the research participants to evolve and integrate the feminist model on intimate partner violence.

Valuing a Feminist Analysis

Kimmel and Messner (2004) stated, “Gender remains one of the organizing principles of social life. We come to know ourselves and our world through the prism of gender. Only we act as if we didn’t know it” (p. ix). Gender is a slippery construct, that is, if it is not front and center within an analysis, it tends to become invisible. Just because some practitioners and theorists ignore or minimize gender (and its related power imbalances) as a variable does not reduce its impact.

In our society, gender joins class and race “as one of the three central mechanisms by which power and resources are distributed in our society” (Kimmel & Messner, 2004), and some models would add sexual orientation, disability, and age. Although early feminists prioritized gender, criticisms by feminists of color, lesbian feminists, socialist feminists, and others expanded the feminist model (Saulnier, 1996). Today, within the feminist framework, including the domestic violence paradigm, feminists speak of multiple feminisms and intersecting oppressions.

The successes of feminism generally, and the violence against women movement in particular, are central to the IFM. Violence against women was not addressed as a public policy problem until feminists identified it as such during the first and second waves of the women’s movement. Previously, society normalized and marginalized violence against women until the grassroots women’s movement demanded legal reform and cultural change. As expressed by Frederick Douglass (1950), “Power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and it never will” (p. 437). Therefore, the success of the feminist movement and the gender dynamics of violence must be acknowledged and retained.

Messerschmidt (2000) articulated the importance of a gendered analysis of violence: “Gender has been advanced consistently by criminologists as the strongest predictor of criminal involvement” (p. 3). A gendered analysis of family violence is an essential component to understanding and intervening in the problem. It is not the *only* component but a primary one. Raphael (2004) stated,

Research, however, does continue to demonstrate that theories of domestic violence causation need to include the gendered nature of battering, its occurrence within the context of gender inequalities, and the use abusers make of threats of violence and actual violence to dominate, humiliate, and control their partners. (p. 1357)

A feminist analysis is also critical, rather than antithetical, to the recognition of women's aggression. Swan and Snow (2002) identified three types of abusive relationships: women as victims (34%), women as aggressors (12%), and mixed relationships (50%). However, the researchers caution:

This study demonstrates the importance of examining women's violence within the context of violence by their male partners. Even in relationships in which women were the aggressors, the women usually experienced significant violence from their partners. Women's violent behavior can only be understood when placed in the context of their male partners' violence against them. (p. 310)

A curriculum developed by Koonin and Cabarcas (2000) demonstrates how abuse by women and men differs. Examples include the following: "He uses his physical power/she uses her verbal power," and "He controls her spending/she runs up the credit cards" (cited in Swan & Snow, 2002, p. 312). Such illustrations reveal that abusive behavior, like all human behavior, is situated within gender roles and cultural expectations about gender.

The feminist paradigm has an important role to play in understanding intimate partner violence. If an explicitly gendered analysis is not introduced, then gender and power issues frequently become marginalized. This puzzle piece of the model is best illustrated by the popular T-shirt slogan, "I will be post-feminist in the post-patriarchy."

Adding Models of Violence Causation

Acknowledging multiple causes of violence fuels the theoretical expansion of the IFM, leading to more complex and nuanced understandings of human aggression. That is, an evolved understanding of domestic violence moves beyond the primary feminist explanation that explains violence solely in terms of male entitlement and privilege enforced by the use of power and control. This expanded model still retains the feminist sociocultural framework but includes other theories of violence within the paradigm.

Feminists need to consider the explanatory role of physiological and neurological factors, evolutionary psychology, substance abuse, childhood experiences of violence, intergenerational transmission of violence, shame and humiliation, attachment disorders, lack of anger control, psychopathology and difficult personality traits, general communication and coping skills deficits, personal inadequacy, and violence as a tool for constructing masculinity in explaining intimate partner violence. In

sum, rather than a singular causation model, the IFM uses a both/and approach that includes multiple models of violence causation.

This “big tent” philosophy allows for better integration of same-sex violence and women’s aggression into the feminist model. The result will lead feminists working in the antiviolence movement to cross disciplines and learn different perspectives, as well as bring their own perspectives to others. Such a stance also has implications for batterer intervention programs, enabling them to expand their repertoire of interventions in working with men and women who are violent. Although much of this work is already occurring, it has not been explicitly brought within the feminist framework, often causing conflict between and within feminist practitioners. It is helpful to remember that feminism is a lens through which other perspectives can be viewed and practiced, creating new synergism rather than divisions.

Worell and Remer (2003) suggested integrating multiple approaches at both the theoretical and applied levels. That is, with feminist theory at the core, the authors recommend a five-step process in evaluating other theories for their compatibility with feminist theory: (a) identify potential sources of bias, (b) restructure the theory’s biased components, (c) determine the viability of the theory, (d) identify compatibility with feminist criteria, and (e) highlight feminist components from the chosen theory. Using a structured format to integrate theories can make practices more ideologically congruent, rather than adopting an “add-and-stir” approach. Some puzzle pieces will fit, enhancing the larger picture, whereas others will not.

Although integration forms the foundation of ecological models, such as presented by Heise (1998), we suggest that rather than being one component of an ecological model, the feminist perspective can be the glue holding together these puzzle pieces, multiple theories, and interventions. This shift allows feminist workers in the domestic violence movement to articulate their feminist perspective while valuing and incorporating complementary theoretical perspectives, thus allowing for expansion and individualization of practice and policy interventions.

Adopting New Assessments and Intervention Practices

Enlarging the theoretical perspective of a feminist approach to domestic violence will lead to changes in practice reflected in current research about intimate partner violence. For instance, feminist practitioners could make clinical distinctions between subgroups of violent couples as identified by Johnson and Leone (2005). Couples that experience *intimate terrorism*, which is rooted in patriarchal traditions of male violence, epitomize the traditional feminist understanding of domestic violence. However, Johnson and his coauthors suggest that other couples may engage in *situational couple violence*, which is not embedded in a general pattern of controlling behavior and may be more amenable to therapeutic and skill-building interventions, such as anger management, communication techniques, and couples’

counseling (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Greene and Bogo (2002) offered four helpful criteria to distinguish between the two types: (a) the range of control tactics; (b) motivation for the use of violence; (c) impact from the physical aggression; and (d) the partner's subjective experience, primarily using fear as a barometer. Greene and Bogo contrast feminist and systemic approaches to treatment and the need to move from an either/or treatment approach to a both/and approach. Such integration would be consistent with the IFM, acknowledging that cookie-cutter solutions do not work and that individualized assessments and solutions, with increased couple choice, must be part of an integrated feminist model.

Therefore, rather than making assumptions (man = perpetrator, woman = victim) and assigning the standard feminist intervention (men in batterer treatment programs and women in support groups), more thorough and individualized assessments will need to be conducted to determine the couples' dynamics, motivations, and treatment options. For some couples, couple counseling may be indicated, and for others with deeper interpersonal issues, individual counseling may be most helpful. This shift will involve listening more closely to what victims and survivors want, rather than offering a more narrow scope of interventions based solely on the feminist construction of domestic violence. Such a strategy is actually more congruent with a feminist ideology than forcing a predetermined intervention on all couples. This change also requires that victim and survivor service providers work more closely with batterers' intervention programs, maybe even merging some agencies to better work with families who wish to stay together. From the perspective of the IFM, the potential for family restoration—when desired by both parties—may require more thorough investigation as a viable goal than has been typically accorded by domestic violence workers. Concerns for safety and accountability have shaped workers' approaches historically and would still have to be weighed and addressed.

This shift in ideology results in two major practice principles. One is a focus on *behavior* rather than *identity*. That is, assumptions should be based on the individual's behavior rather than on whether the person was male or female. The second underlying principle would be *empathy* and *accountability* for *all* persons. This framework acknowledges that there is often a blurred line between victim and perpetrator. Today's male perpetrator was often a childhood victim, and a battered woman may also be an abusive mother. This expanded model means increased training for feminist counselors in assessment, couple counseling, and widening the number and nature of referral sources.

Practicing from this ideological shift would require that workers be highly trained and able to conduct sensitive and complex assessments. Staff would be responsible for developing and delivering more multifaceted interventions. Necessarily, such a shift would require an even greater level of service professionalization, an already occurring trend that has drawn criticism for depoliticizing the violence against women movement (Kanuha, 1998; Markowitz & Tice, 2002). However, as the work

of Whalen (1996) points out, the potential exists for professionalism and activism to coexist productively.

Increasing Survivor Choice

According to participants, despite feminist values of choice, empowerment, and self-determination, most women and men who contend with the legal system experience little choice or empowerment. Practicing within the IFM, victim and survivor choice again would become the mainstay of practice. Of course, as the participants also noted, choice is often a double-edged sword.

Increasing victim and survivor choice could lead to power shifts in the domestic violence response system, including less power for the criminal justice system in the areas of mandatory arrests and prosecutions and less power for the mental health professionals and other counselors to dictate interventions. McDermott and Garofalo (2004) echoed some of these sentiments, “The views of the victims should be the primary consideration, even if professionals in and out of the criminal justice system believe some of them are making bad choices or acting contrary to their own interests” (p. 1264).

Changing Policy and Institutional Responses

Part of the integration of the feminist model is acknowledging the weaknesses of some institutional responses, especially the criminal justice system. Traditionally, violence occurring between intimates was not taken as seriously as violence that occurred between strangers. Subsequently, laws were changed that criminalized intimate partner violence, in effect treating these two situations more similarly. However, these two types of violence cannot be understood as the same. That is, the violent behaviors may be the same, but the motivations and contexts for these behaviors are often very different. Specifically, violence between two intimates often involves children and a wish to stay together, but without the violence. Although involving the criminal justice system has some benefits, it also has serious limitations.

However, as study participants noted, feminists have not been solely responsible for this pronounced reliance on the criminal justice system. Many larger social forces have affected the trend including a “get-tough-on-crime” political mind-set, the victim compensation movement, funding mandates, and the current conservative political climate. Thus, attributing the increased involvement and more punitive responses of the criminal justice system solely to feminists overestimates their power and influence and misunderstands their philosophies.

Numerous scholarly critiques and research results, echoed here by the words of the participants, note the disappointments and failures of the criminal justice system to adequately address intimate partner violence, and these failures are leading many in the field to look to alternative dispositions. However, there is much skepticism

and many concerns about alternatives, voiced by researchers and frontline workers, especially the IACs outlined by Mills.

The IFM does not call for the decriminalization of intimate partner violence. However, it does add to the voices already questioning mandatory arrests and prosecutions. In addition, it calls for a continued examination of current practices and consideration of alternative methods that might provide better solutions for women, men, and their children, without losing sight of the many ways women continue to be disadvantaged in a society that has traditionally favored men.

One thing seems clear: Neither an unresponsive nor an overresponsive criminal justice system is ideal. However, few viable alternatives to criminal justice involvement exist today. Community involvement and accountability sound less threatening than state involvement, but this study's participants believe that communities may be ill equipped and unmotivated to take on this task because of ignorance about domestic violence dynamics and minimization of its impact. These participants are on the front lines of this issue, working with victims, survivors, perpetrators, and their children every day. Their cautions should be duly noted, and they need to be actively involved in the development of viable alternatives.

Alternative models and programs. Growing disenchantment with the criminal justice system's response to intimate partner violence is leading to the proposal of many alternatives. A sampling of these responses includes a triangular relationship between the state, family, and community mediated by John Braithwaite's theory of responsive regulation (Kelly, 2004); viewing the criminal justice system not only as a means of punishment but as an institution for expressing human rights norms (Larsen & Petersen, 2001); addressing poverty as well as violence, because battering is more prevalent in low-income households in the United States (Raphael, 2004); restorative justice practices that address multiple causes of violence such as racism, economic subordination, and childhood experiences, as well as personal responsibility for using violence (Coker, 2004); and IACs grounded in restorative justice (Grauwiler & Mills, 2004). Alternative models of accountability are being tested in the area of sexual assault, such as RESTORE (Responsibility and Equity for Sexual Transgressions; Koss, Bachar, & Hopkins, 2003) and in the domestic violence arena, such as the Tubman Family Alliance in Minneapolis, Minnesota (www.harriettubman.org). Clearly, more alternative programs and subsequent evaluation studies are needed.

Conclusion

Critiques of the feminist approach to domestic violence are not new. However, as this study reveals, the critiques are not only external but are also coming from within the movement. Feminist practitioners in this study often note dissonance between

the traditional feminist model and their experience as frontline workers. Although this study has limitations because of sample size and lack of generalizability, it does add support for an integration of multiple perspectives and changes in policy and practices within the feminist perspective. Both internal and external critiques push the feminist model to expand based on new research that reflects the complexity of domestic violence, the unintended consequences of domestic violence policies, and the experiences of frontline workers.

Few social problems are adequately explained by a single cause or addressed by a one-size-fits-all solution. Although gendered power differentials play an important role in domestic violence, we must adjust our models to reflect our growing awareness of additional explanatory factors and dynamics. The participants in this research were willing and, in fact, eager to engage in theoretical expansion. The readiness of frontline workers to consider a critique of their model and examine their own practices stands in stark contrast to the largely negative and ideologically rigid portrait of “mainstream feminists” presented by Mills (2003).

Ideally, there should be a dialogue between ideology and practice with each informing the other. The IFM is a result of this dialogue. The IFM builds on the acknowledgment of multiple models (Chornesky, 2000; Danis, 2003) and the ecological perspective (Heise, 1998) that recognize multiple explanations of intimate partner violence while adding a unique piece. That is, rather than merely acknowledging the legitimacy of other models, the IFM brings elements of those models into the feminist fold, making these other perspectives congruent with feminist perspectives and practices, appropriate for use by the feminist activist, advocate, or practitioner. The model integrates other perspectives that enrich the feminist model while holding tightly to the strengths of the feminist model that acknowledges the political and social structures that perpetuate inequality such as the unequal distribution of resources on the basis of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, and disability. However, it is important to note that alternative models will not unquestioningly be brought into the feminist model but rather subjected to a rigorous critique of its fit with a feminist paradigm as outlined by Worell and Remer (2003).

The next step in this model’s formulation is detailing the specific models, practices, and interventions that fit within the IFM. For instance, Johnson and Leone’s model (2005) fits well within the feminist paradigm (i.e., intimate terrorism), while at the same time expanding it (i.e., situational couple violence). This exercise will be fraught with difficulty as tensions are exposed and conflicts expressed. For instance, one tension easily identified is that the IFM calls for valuing voices of victims and survivors, many of whom become domestic violence workers, while also recognizing that a more complex understanding of domestic violence might require involving skilled professionals who can deliver nuanced clinical assessments and a range of theoretical perspectives, interventions, and referrals.

At the same time, the model addresses flaws within the feminist approach to domestic violence. Feminist practitioners no longer have to bend their model to the

breaking point to address female aggression or same-sex violence. Feminist practitioners no longer have to feel conflicted, disloyal, or constricted by the feminist model as it embraces a more complex understanding of violence without sacrificing the vital importance of a gendered analysis of power, control, and violence.

However, the skepticism of frontline workers to proposed alternative solutions must be acknowledged, because they are immersed in the problem day after day, especially because their objections are based on concerns for safety of vulnerable clients rather than ideological rigidity. Alternative interventions should be carefully monitored and evaluated. The IFM is a single step in the journey to better solutions and more choices for victims and survivors. As a work in progress, it will need to continue to evolve to respond to new research, interventions, and theories. Although the IFM evolved from this study, it is important to note that it was not created in isolation. Discussions, debates, critiques, and alternatives have been presented in the literature for the past decade, and the IFM is reflective of the work of multiple researchers, practitioners, and activists working across disciplines. Feminist ideology provides a powerful lens through which to critique existing perspectives but must not exclude its own ideology from analysis. This new model is more congruent with feminist values of choice, self-determination, and empowerment than some current practices labeled feminist.

For some feminist practitioners, integration might feel like capitulation. There is fear that any move away from a single feminist explanation of intimate partner violence might render a gendered power analysis irrelevant. We must acknowledge the current conservative political environment in which domestic violence work is conducted. As one research participant noted, Mills's critique of feminist practice may have gained more mainstream attention than most scholarly work because of its assault on feminism. However, making the feminist perspective the glue that holds the disparate puzzle pieces together in the IFM ensures that the political and/or structural context of domestic violence remains visible in practice and policy.

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