

Analytical reaction to
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"traumatic origins of
intimate rage" es...



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Analytical Reaction to Donald G. Dutton's "Traumatic Origins of Intimate Rage" Essay Sample

Donald G. Dutton's "Traumatic Origins of Intimate Rage" elicited several reactions even before I sat down to digest the article's contents, and I could not truthfully react to this piece without acknowledging the prejudices with which I approach this work and others like it. In the spirit of Dutton's article, I shall call these prejudices my own "triad" of issues.

First, I anticipate that one of the facts that will be ignored is the degree to which the abuser manages to hide his actions from the view of those who might punish him in return. In other words, the average abuser does not hit his wife in public where he runs the risk of an observer intervening, or a law enforcement officer arresting him; therefore, I have a difficult time understanding how the same person who can't control his rage in general (i. e. abusing his wife), can manage to control the where and when of its manifestation. I simply cannot disassociate the general ability to perceive right from wrong with the specific ability to mask inappropriate behavior: I could better understand abusers if they were to verbally or physically abuse their wives in public as routinely as they were to abuse them in their homes. True to my expectations, this is not addressed in Dutton's piece.

The second issue in my triad is to wonder how (or if) this particular study will address the reason(s) that most abusers are men. How is it possible that little girls are subjected to rage and abuse and abandonment, yet, unlike their male counterparts, they do not seem to turn this abuse into violence against their spouses? This question is alluded to when Dutton notes that

according to Green and Carmen, et al, " girls [are] more likely to aggress towards themselves and boys against others, presumably because of differences in identification with the aggressor" (qtd. in Dutton, 1999, p. 442). But that is it: there is no more, and not only am I left dissatisfied at this mere taste of a discussion, but also I am left to wonder how it is "presumably" the case.

The final portion of my triad of prejudices has to do with a lack of thought towards

physiology: I have always wondered if the majority of abusers would still be men if the physiological make-up of the genders were different. If women had greater physical prowess, would men still turn their anger outward? Imagine that the average man were 5'6" tall, weighed approximately 125 pounds, and generally lacked upper body strength; would he still be inexorably driven to rage at his 6'1", 175 pound wife who could bench press 150 pounds for multiple repetitions? Not surprisingly, this is not addressed in Dutton's piece.

Turning away from the baggage I carry into the reading and focusing on a direct analytical response to it, I was first struck by a descriptive phrase in Dutton's abstract: the " cyclical aspect of the behavior" (Dutton, 1999, p. 431). If this behavior (i. e. abuse) is repetitive, when and how did it begin? If it takes an abuser to produce the personality traits most necessary to induce the victim to later be an abuser, who was the first guilty party? Of course, this is not a question that anyone might be expected to answer, but it does lead one to wonder: since the first abuser had to be an anomaly,

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doesn't it follow that the "cyclical aspect of the behavior" can be circumvented?

Dutton briefly turns his attention to results of the MMPI and the MCMI to discuss profile attributes of batterers. The included statistics led me to two thoughts: first, the data seems to be confined to the United States, and I wondered whether or not these same patterns—in similar percentages—would be exhibited under differing social settings (i. e. outside of the United States). My second thought was prompted by details Dutton includes from research by Brown and Anderson (1991); Bryer, Nelson, Miller, & Krol (1987); and Herman, Perry & van der Kolk (1989), which concludes that "child abuse survivors are [. . .] more likely to be diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder," a condition connected with abusiveness (qtd. in Dutton, 1999, p. 433). This brings me to one of my earlier issues: where do the female victims of child abuse fit?

One of the more intriguing conclusions mentioned was Dutton's citation of Walker (1979) that describes "battering episodes as erupting from inner tensions rather than in response to external stimuli" (qtd. in Dutton, 1999, p. 433). This forced me to question the validity of the relationship between some abusive outbursts that occur subsequent to perceived failures; for example, a husband beating his wife for overcooking a meal. Applying Walker's conclusion, there had to have been something festering within the abuser prior to the victim's failure-to-appease to set that abuser off.

One of the focal points of Dutton's triad is the issue of a child's being shamed (Dutton, 1999, p. 434). While I can accept the relationship between

this and permutations of shame as later manifesting as anger, what I cannot understand is how the teasing (i. e. shaming) that most children tolerate weighs less heavily on the psyche than that of the shaming at the hands of a parent. After all, children are supremely susceptible to peer-pressure and peer-evaluation, and anyone who has spent a few minutes around a playground can attest to the viciousness with which many children are teased.

Another stunning fact that was revealed to me was the citation of Terr's work by Dutton. Terr (1981, 1983) reveals that " children [. . .] re-experience trauma through repetitive play rather than through flashbacks" (qtd. in Dutton, 1999, p. 434). This may shed significant light on much of the seemingly unwarranted aggressiveness displayed by children who are at play: it's not so much that Bobby hit Johnny for no reason; it's more that Bobby is reenacting an event at Johnny's expense.

I found a later statement in the " Theoretical connection to prior trauma" section of Dutton's piece to be somewhat misleading: " All studies found that children who were physical abuse victims were significantly more likely to commit crimes as adults" (Dutton, 1999, p. 434). This conclusion is filled with unexplained words and hollow suppositions. Just how many studies does " all" represent? " Physical abuse victims" is rather vague: are these victims repeatedly victimized or victimized only one time? What kinds of " crimes" did the abuse lead to in adulthood? Most troubling to me was the phraseology which seemed to beg the reader to interpret " all studies" to mean " all children."

Another compelling piece of information is contained in the “Witnessing/experiencing violence as a source of trauma” portion of Dutton’s analysis. He cites Lisak, Hopper, and Song (1996) who “found that most (70%) perpetrators of physical abuse had experienced victimization (physical or sexual abuse); however, most abused men did not become perpetrators” (qtd. in Dutton, 1999, p. 435). This indicates that an individual who is allowed a normal formation of conscience but later suffers abuse retains the ability to behave in compliance with social norms and established laws, but that an abused child who is not afforded this developmental opportunity is not able to rely on a properly formed conscience when decision-making.

Dutton refers to research by Schore (1994) who states that “increased levels of [maternal] touch and other somesthetic sensory modalities have both immediate and long-term [positive] effects” (qtd. in Dutton, 1999, p. 437). This begs that an explanation be given regarding those who are orphaned and/or those who have no “maternal’ component present: what becomes of them given this model? It also seems to require an examination of the role that alternate caregivers and relatives play in the proper formation of identity.

This last point triggered a reflection about the make-up of “family” and “couple,” which led me to additional issues: first, what similarities or differences are present in same-sex couples; specifically, same-sex male couples? Since the difference in social construct and physiological superiority are no longer in the mix, are changes in abuse frequency present? What about age? Is there a significant difference between the

abuser/victim relationship when one observes pairings that occur later in life, and if so, to what might that be attributed?

The “ Trauma and anger” section of Dutton’s paper refers to work done by Chemtob, Novaco, Hamada, Gross, & Smith (1997) who report that “ because people with PTSD are primed to identify threat, they engage in survival mode [*sic*] anger more rapidly.” The authors go on to say “ as an individual detects ‘ evidence’ of threat, anger and aggression are potentiated. When they are potentiated, the threat system is further activated resulting in a ‘ self-confirming’ vicious cycle” (qtd. in Dutton, 1999, p. 439). I can’t help but see a relationship between this description and the base human trait often referred to as the fight or flight instinct. In some ways, the pattern described seems necessary for human survival—of course, the need for a conscience-based application of the pattern is obvious.

Finally, I must turn to one of the several areas that cited surveys of military personnel who after having been exposed to war-time distress exhibited many of the same profile traits as did abusers whose past history included childhood trauma (Dutton, 1999, p. 442). While initially intriguing, I cannot help but feel as if these statistics lack one important control: the profiles of the military personnel prior to their exposure to combat. Without this data, the assumption that the scores are a result of duty is false, and really does nothing to support Dutton’s triad.

Overall I found much of Dutton’s article edifying; however, I leave with as many questions as I entered, and in truth, none of my triad of prejudices has been dispelled.

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Reference

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