

# Psychological and sociological theories of domestic violence

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



Domestic violence is a crime that occurs regularly within the United States. It claims millions of victims each year. There is not a specific cause to establish why domestic violence occurs. However, it has been documented that domestic violence is a product of physical, emotional, sexual, psychological, and any other forms of torture or torment that the particular abuser wishes to employ to gain control or power over their victims (Gosselin, 2005).

Due to the complexity of this crime, many criminologists and socialologists have studied its causes and the effects in order to determine social policies and additional theories to better understand the causation of domestic violence. The social policies and theories that are developed from this research can better explain, educate, and assist the victims of domestic abuse, the judicial system, and law enforcement on how to gain a clearer understanding regarding the relationship between crime causation, criminal behavior, and domestic abuse (Greene, Heilburn, Fortune and Nietzel, 2007).

Most importantly, the much needed research and data will empower law enforcement with the much needed knowledge to respond and combat the growing epidemic of domestic violence. Crime theories can be grouped into four categories: biological, sociological, psychological, and social-psychological.

Each of these theories have assisted the criminal justice system by providing specific knowledge and data that has been helpful with the establishment of laws (specific laws that fit the crime of domestic violence such as the stalking law), sentencing practices (different punishment guidelines for acts of domestic abuse that differ from non-domestic situations), and social

policies (aid and education for abuse victims) (Greene, Heilburn, Fortune and Nietzel, 2007).

In addition to existing theories, new theories are developed based on the research concluded from studies involving crime victim statistics and punishment of offenders. These theories are established in hopes to develop a means to an end for domestic abuse. Hopefully, there will be a theory developed to end the vicious cycle of abuse so the actions of an abuser can be identified before fatal incidents of abuse begin. When referring to the causation of domestic violence, more than one theory can assist in the explanation of its causation.

In my opinion, the sociological theory and the psychological theory best explain the causation of domestic abuse. The sociological theory, otherwise known as the social theory, believes that criminals commit crimes due to social forces, cultural differences, specific religious beliefs, and/or as a result of their surroundings (low income or poverty stricken areas) (Gosselin, 2005). The sociological theory contains two subtopic theories which are called structural and subcultural theories.

The structural theory, which applies to domestic violence, believes that individuals who possess low or lack of educational opportunities, a low income status, and/or a lack of community support are susceptible to choose a life of criminal activity (Greene, Heilburn, Fortune and Nietzel, 2007). This theory relates to domestic violence, because it has been established that economic stress is a trigger for abuse, as well as, cultural differences.

Offenders that suffer from loss of employment, poverty, limited access to cash or credit, or that have someone who is dependent on them solely for support are, at times, triggered by the stress and lash out on the victim in a physical or emotional manner which results in domestic abuse (Gosselin, 2005). Cultural differences, such as, beliefs that women are inferior to males or women are the property of males, have also sparked incidents of domestic violence which have claimed victims not only in the United States but worldwide.

An additional theory that falls under the umbrella of the sociological theory which, in my opinion, explains domestic violence is the rational choice theory. The rational choice theory has laid the groundwork to establish a better understanding regarding social and economically driven behavior (Schacter, Gilbert, & Wegner, 2009). This theory believes that an individual will choose criminal behavior by “ free will” after weighing out the rewards and benefits verses the consequences or punishment for their behavior (Gosselin, 2005).

In essence, the abuser will choose domestic violence as a means to the end since they feel control and domination is necessary in order to coexist within personal relationships. On the other hand, if the offender believes the risks outweigh the ability achieve personal gain, control, or satisfaction, he or she may choose not to commit the abuse (Schacter, et al. , 2009). I believe this theory explains the restraint an abuser displays when they carefully select the type of abuse administered to their victims and the length of time they choose to enact the abuse.

Most abusers will not openly abuse their victims in front of others in order to deter detection. Detection is not an option for most abusers, since they are familiar with the consequences of their actions. A second example of a theory that would explain domestic violence would be the social learning theory. This theory falls under the category of the psychological theory. The social learning theory is the most relevant theory that applies to criminology. " Behavior is supported by rewards and extinguished by negative reactions or punishments" (Siegel, 2007, p. 109).

The social learning theory believes people are not born with the ability to act in a violent manner. However, theorists suggest and believe aggressive and violent behavior is learned through observation, life experience, and society which will cause an individual to be aggressive and violent to others (Siegel, 2008). It is further believed the behavior manifests in young children when they are subjected to violence and /or aggression they observe from adult role models. In addition, social learning theorists believe this behavior is learned through a process called behavior modeling/modification.

The study of behavior is paramount, in order to establish a framework of understanding regarding the motivation behind the abuser's criminal activity. Behavioral modeling/modification can be described in three principle sources that cause criminal behavior. The sources are family interactions, interactions with mass media, and environmental experiences (Gosselin, 2005).

Understanding behavioral modification is important in order to comprehend the root cause of criminal activity.

In my opinion and experience with dealing with offenders, the concept of behavioral modification helps to better understand domestic abuse when it occurs from the hands of a previous victim who has turned to a life of offending. There are a number of abusers who claim to have suffered from issues pertaining to relationships with family, had adverse interactions with mass media (pornography), or have suffered adverse environmental experiences (homeless or unemployed) that have caused them to lack the skills needed to maintain a productive relationship within society.

The study of family interactions has shown that aggressive children are a part of a family whose members use similar tactics with others, thus, implanting the seed for future abuse. Secondly, studies regarding the effects that mass media have on individuals has shown that video games, television, and other mass media that depicts violence in a rewarding manner, influence the behavior of an individual in a number of ways that can result in future criminal behavior (Siegel, 2008). Lastly, environmental studies regarding the effects society and culture have on an individual, has provided data that concluded individuals from low income areas, which are riddled with crime, are prone to act aggressively more so than individuals who hail from areas with lower crime rates (Siegel, 2008). Thus, observation and learned behavior will lay the groundwork for continued aggressive behavior which may remain with an individual throughout adulthood. Finally, stress due to observing adverse behavior and/or the psychological or emotional effects of learned behavior can be a catalyst for an individual to apply what they have learned by engaging in criminal acts.

This may cause repeated cycles of criminal, aggressive, or violent behavior (Siegel, 2008). As we have learned from domestic abuse incidents, a number of abusers do come from low income areas, have endured stress from the observations and learned behavior of others, possess cultural differences, and/or were previously victimized in their lifetime. The cycle of domestic violence is another example that is supported in the psychological theory category.

From the previous explanation, it is logical to conclude that the social learning theory suggests the cycle of domestic violence can be explained by the social learning theory. Through learning the weaknesses and observing the shortcomings of a potential victim, the abuser will use their knowledge to enact abuse. The cycle of violence theory, which falls under the psychological theory category, believes there is “substantial evidence that a generational cycle of violence occurs in domestic assaults” (Gosselin, 2005, p. 77).

Many abusers will admit that they have been subjected to a number of factors, such as, being a victim of former abuse at the hands of an immediate family member, have observed the effects of abuse on others, or suffered from stress that allowed them to believe abuse is a means to an end. Personal choice, as referred to by the rational choice theory, suggests the abuser does understand the causes and effects of his or her actions by the selective methods they choose to inflict the abuse. In summary, the exact causation of domestic violence is a mystery.

The true and exact reasoning used by an abuser will remain inside their mind unless they honestly offered to explain their actions. Based on statistical data and research provided by criminologists, we can understand the effect abuse has on an individual, as well as, the methods used to commit the offense. Theories are mere suggestions of what may cause incidents. They do not provide the specific answers needed to end the abuse. However, theories do empower law enforcement officers and victimologists with the much needed knowledge to combat abuse and assist victims.