

Patriarchy and violence in heterosexual relationships essay sample



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Domestic violence as it occurs in heterosexual relationships can be defined as belonging to two categories: spontaneous violence that occurs as a reaction to stressful situations and which may be initiated and participated in by both partners; and, domestic violence perpetrated exclusively against the female by the male which seeks to satisfy notions of entitlement, to increase the amount of control the male feels over “ his” woman and which almost always escalates over time (Johnson, 1995).

Because violence of the first type is reactionary, analyzing it from a perspective of gender norms is difficult. Violent situations can erupt under any number of circumstances and over different issues depending upon the individual psychology of those involved. However, where domestic violence fits a pattern of male domination or notions of entitlement to dominate an intimate partner on the part of the male, there are clearly sociologically relevant factors involved. In a situation where violence spontaneously erupts, the reasons for that violence may change from incident to incident.

In cases where abuse is repetitive and escalatory, however, the violence itself may be seen as a symptom of a greater problem; it may be a symptom of a notion of masculinity being intrinsically connected with control and violence on the male’s part and that problem may continue to motivate future acts of violence against his partner. Michael P. Johnson in his article “ Patriarchal Terrorism and Common Couple Violence: Two Forms of Violence Against Women” defines this sort of abuse as “ patriarchal terrorism”, a label which does well to explain its roots as well as its nature. the causal dynamic of patriarchal terrorism is rooted in patriarchal traditions, adopted with a

vengeance by men who feel that they must control “ their” women by any means necessary. (Johnson, 1995)

Male Dominance and Female Submission Patriarchy and patterns of patriarchal thought in society have been well-documented by feminist scholars. By definition, the male in a patriarchal relationship is in control and entitled to make decisions for “ his” woman, to dictate her actions and to overrule her desires and opinions.

Even the term “ battered woman” carries with it the implication that being battered is a characteristic of the female rather than rightly stating that the male in the relationship is one who carries with him a pattern of committing acts of battery against his partner (Johnson, 1995). The widespread acceptance of the label “ battered woman” in and of itself could be seen as a testament to a widespread pattern of patriarchal thinking, even on the part of those who seek to help women caught in abusive relationships.

Part and parcel to the idea of patriarchy is the definition of masculinity. Though the definition of what it is to be a “ man” has changed over time, there remain long-held notions that a man should be physically powerful and dangerous and that there is an inherently male need to express violence (Lakey, p. 451). Male protagonists in popular films are seldom tender, forgiving or adverse to using violence as a first resort.

If the male should view the exercise of violence against his partner as a normal, male response to being challenged, physical abuse would be unlikely to be seen as deviant on his part. For the abusive male whose crimes are born of a patriarchal mindset, the continuance of the dysfunction must also flow

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from the female partner's willingness to view the situation as inevitable. " Sex inequality cannot be routinely enforced through open violence or even blatant discriminatory agreements—patriarchy also needs its values accepted in the minds of the people. (Lahey, p. 452). "

We end up with a two-fold problem that perpetuates the abuse: the male must believe that he is entitled to the control he achieves by abusing his partner and the female must accept that the abuse is forgivable in light of it being a non-deviant, gender-appropriate behavior. To understand the abuse, it is important to understand what happens after it occurs. In a 1992 study, Jane H. Wolf-Smith and Ralf LaRossa studied the patterns of abuse among 50 white women. Among their important findings were the differences in the contrition phase, which occurs after a violent incident.

In this study, it was found that the male partner would gradually feel a lessening remorse for his battering. Conversely, the female partner was less likely to accept apologies as the abuse went on. It is important to note that the interviews were conducted with women who had sought out help at a shelter which indicates that they had already come to see the patterns of abuse in their lives as deviant by the time they were interviewed but, apparently, did not beforehand. In their cases, being terrorized in their relationships ceased to be acceptable or forgivable.

For the men, however, who feel less and less inclined to see the error of their ways, there likely exists in their minds a tendency to validate the ideals of masculinity as expressed by patriarchal tradition. Patriarchy tells men that their need for love and respect can only be met by being masculine,

powerful, and ultimately violent. As men come to accept this, their sexuality begins to reflect it. Violence and sexuality combine to support masculinity as a character ideal. (Lahey, p. 451)

Of course, patriarchy does not just seek to define masculinity but to define femininity as well. There has been something of a backlash against feminism, which is to say that some women have expressed an affinity for the patriarchal tradition by way of idealizing its concept of femininity. The notion that the difficulties of marriage can be overcome by simply “surrendering” oneself to the inevitability of a male’s superiority in some areas has caught a bit of traction of late, perhaps best demonstrated by Laura Doyle’s book “The Surrendered Wife”.

Doyle advocates that women give up their very human desire to be an equal partner in their marriages in order to facilitate a harmonious, fulfilling relationship. When I was choosing control over allowing myself to be vulnerable, I was doing so at the expense of intimacy. What I know now is that control and intimacy are opposites. If I want one, I can’t have the other. Without being vulnerable, I can’t have intimacy. Without intimacy, there can be no romance or emotional connection.

When I am vulnerable with my husband, the intimacy, passion, and devotion seem to flow naturally. Doyle, p. 23) Here we find expressed the notion that one cannot simultaneously be in charge of any aspect of a relationship—perhaps in charge of even one’s self—and be feminine. We also find the perfect counterpart to the patriarchal ideal of the male as domineering and violent: the woman as submissive and vulnerable. This meshes well with the

ideology of the abuser. Note Doyle's acceptance that her choices are limited by her gender. In Doyle's world, a woman must make a choice between power and intimacy.

Her sexuality and her emotional fulfillment have an inverse relationship to her desire to exercise control over her relationship. While no one would argue that a hunger for power is conducive to a healthy relationship it would be hard to argue that a healthy relationship can exist where one person voluntarily subjugates themselves with no cause other than an outdated, and some might say destructive, notion of femininity. This idea of what it is to be feminine in Doyle's book is the reverse of the controlling, masculine woman described as intolerable by many batterers.

Although interviewees expressed remorse for their violent behavior, they also implied that it was justified in light of their partners' controlling behavior. Moreover, their violence was rewarded by their partners' feelings of guilt, suggesting that violence is simultaneously a performance of masculinity and a means by which respondents encouraged the performance of femininity by female partners (Anderson, 2001).

Despite Doyle's insistence that she is not advocating that women stay in abusive relationships or that they become doormats (Doyle, p. 9), it is hard to see how, exactly, she is advocating anything other than a relationship, and mindset, that would tend to make a woman more accepting of being abused. This sort of regressivist nonsense may well be laughable to the educated mind, but it must be considered that the book has been a bestseller and that a "movement" of surrendered wives has popped up

around Doyle's writings. If ever patriarchy found safe harbor in the modern world, it has certainly found it among the pages of Doyle's book.

Her obvious call to submit is couched in the language of "respect". For her, however, respect is essentially a one-way street, the husband gains self-respect via the constant deference of his wife. The wife, in order to accommodate this, is advised to behave in a way that is nothing short of absurd. Respect means that when he takes the wrong freeway exit you don't correct him by telling him where to turn. It means that if he keeps going in the wrong direction you will go past the state line and still not correct what he's doing.

In fact, no matter what your husband does, you will not try to teach, improve or correct him. That is the essence of a surrendered wife (Doyle, p. 35). It's not hard to imagine that a modern, enlightened man may well wonder why his partner didn't care enough to point out that they were going in the wrong direction. It's also hard to understand why it would be preferable for a woman to not share her knowledge in a case where it would have been of obvious benefit to their relationship, not to mention their travel plans.

The only explanation, of course, is that one possessed of Doyle's ideology would find it preferable that the woman remain silent so as not to shatter her husband's apparently quite fragile gender-identity. As Doyle states, control and controlling behavior will always be a source of conflict in a relationship. Some researchers have speculated that it is not patriarchy itself, but resistance to its native power arrangement that may be the impetus for

partner violence. “ It may be that conflicts over dominance, not dominance itself, leads to aggression and violence (Felson, 2001). ”

Felson points out that many relationships that have aspects of dominance, teacher/student, parent/child, and that those relationships carry on without violence ever becoming a norm. It is the resistance to the dominance that serves as the impetus for the control insecurity on the part of the male that then leads to domestic violence. It is natural to see why women in a relationship with a domineering male may well find advice within Doyle’s book that would serve to calm their relationships: so long as they do not challenge the authority of he who “ wears the pants”, they will have little contention in their relationships.

This philosophy of what it is to be feminine fits neatly with that of many abusers: “ These representations of female partners as dominating enabled men to position themselves as victims of masculinized female partners. The relational construction of masculinity is visible in these accounts; women who “ wear the pants” disrupt the binary opposition of masculinity/femininity (Anderson, 2001). ”

It bears mentioning that, despite their body of impressive work, some feminist scholars may also contribute to the idea that male-initiated domestic violence is an inevitability. Masculine sexuality involves the oppression of women, competition among men and homophobia (fear of homosexuality) (Lakey, p. 450)” This is a rather grim notion of male sexuality, to be sure, and it seems that one would do well to regard such a statement with an eye to the apparent ideological rigidity of its authors. It

also fails to take into account that violence is generally regarded as an anti-social form of behavior. Perpetrators of domestic violence tend to be the same people who perpetrate acts of violence in other situations, as well (Buzawa, 2002).

This may mean that their adherence to a masculinity defined by acts of violent domination is a life-encompassing pattern, rather than just a facet of their intimate lives. One should also bear in mind that violence as an expression of masculinity, particularly masculine sexuality, is in many cases subject to legal and social sanctions. The attitude of a couple when forming a relationship seems relevant. If the patriarchal tradition is not present in either of their minds, the control-driven abuse seems much less likely to ensue.

Among couples who embrace feminism, or at least reject patriarchy, as a world-view, the situation seems to be more egalitarian both in the division of power and in the definition of the gender-roles within the relationship. In these cases, the idea of “ upgrading” the institution of marriage is held to be a mutually-beneficial arrangement and the notion that equality is preferable to “ surrender” on either member of the couple’s part precedes the formation of the relationship.. Couples reported practicing vigilance, defined as an attending and monitoring of equality, within and outside of their relationship.

This vigilance began prior to their marriage, and for some, prior to meeting their partner (Blaisure, 1995). “ It’s interesting to note that marriage is seen as subject to an “ upgrade” which tends to indicate that the usual nature of

the arrangement is seen as inherently patriarchal by such couples. Norms Concerning Violence Directed Against Women

In a patriarchal arrangement, it could be argued that it is not outside the bounds of a male's authority to use violence to exercise control over his partner, much as some would argue that striking a child is simply an appropriate expression of parental authority. While many scholars have argued that this is a norm, there is a contrasting thought that the prevailing social norm is to protect women from violence and that partner violence tends to have a recurrent nature not because it is a norm but principally because the partners tend to keep the matter secret (Felson, 2001).

It may well be that modern society retains elements of patriarchy. However, this does not mean that it is the ideal. It follows that a man's right to control "his" woman may survive among the members of some relationships but this, as well, does not mean that it is the accepted norm. Those who believe violence against women is normative often point to the high level of violence against women in the United States or elsewhere. However, that a behavior is common does not indicate that people approve of it. Norms vary in the degree to which they control behavior.

The norm of reciprocity, for example, has an important impact on social behavior, but people frequently violate it. (Felson, 2001) Even Doyle expresses disapproval of physical violence directed toward women, despite her call to "surrender". Even though the relationships for which she advocates and the power struggles that may erupt within them could set the stage for patriarchal violence, she expresses aversion to the idea of a

woman being struck physically by her partner. 1. Do not surrender to a man who is physically abusive to you. When your safety is threatened, there can be no intimacy.

I urge you to leave your relationship as quickly as possible if your husband has done any of the following: Hit you, Kicked you, Punched you, Physically forced you to be sexual against your will. [ital. original] (Doyle, p. 27) Even in the very male-dominated relationship which Doyle seems to idealize, she has no room for physical violence on the part of an intimate partner. This seems to go along with Felson's assessment of the social norm protecting women from violence. There is a question as to whether this norm would be at all helpful in preventing violence in a domestic setting.

After all, even if there is a social norm protecting women from violence, there is little protection available when the woman is in a situation where the only would-be protector is the abuser. Especially when a man defines his gender partially by his ability to visit violence upon his partner and she, in turn, may have been conditioned to equate femininity with vulnerability. In Anderson and Umberson's article, they trace the idea among men that their ability to be uncontrollably violent is intrinsic to their gender-identity.

Respondents' interpretations of ineffectual female violence and lethal male violence reflect actual violent practices in a culture that grants men more access to violence, but they also gender violence. By denying a threat from women's violence, participants performed masculinity and reinforced notions of gender difference. Women were constructed as incompetent in the practice of violence, and their successes were trivialized (Anderson, 2001).

From these accounts and studies, it seems that there are a variety of factors that play into abusive relationships where the causal element is rooted in the patriarchal tradition.

First, the male must believe his masculinity is partially defined by his ability to control “ his” woman and, further, he must view violence as an occasionally, or regularly, acceptable means of doing so. Second, the female in the relationship must believe that her femininity is partially defined by her willingness to surrender to her partner and that such a giving up of control is preferable to disharmony in a relationship. Third, the female must act in such a way or express opinions that challenge the male’s notions of entitlement to control.

Fourth, because there is a good case to be made that there exists a cultural norm that calls for the protection of women against violence and physical harm—“ women and children first” in an emergency situation and “ attacks on women and children” to define an atrocity—the abuse must remain hidden from society at large which avoids intervention by family, friends or law enforcement. Structural Changes Against Patriarchy and Abuse Recent changes, mostly since the 1990’s, have made domestic violence more than a social taboo.

In most states, there are specific laws that criminalize acts of violence against domestic partners and there have been many efforts to accommodate women who find themselves the recipients of abuse (Hawkins, 2002) In fact, with the exceptions of Canada, Brazil and Paraguay, there are now national laws that criminalize domestic abuse in every state within the

Americas (Hawkins, 2002). While there are always elements of patriarchy to be pointed out and studied, it is hard to deny that there has been progress on this front.

There has also been a paradigm shift. Where patriarchy may once have been viewed as inevitable and natural, a woman being dominated, especially physically, by a male partner is generally viewed as a situation requiring correction, up to and including legal intervention. As an indicator of that shift, a variety of services are available to the victims of domestic abuse, including shelters, telephone counseling, special police resources and personnel trained to deal with domestic violence.

Laws have been specifically tailored to serve the needs and protect the life and limb of victims and group and individual counseling is oftentimes available to help heal the mental wounds. (Hawkins, 2002). While this may be a ray of hope, Hawkins and Humes point out that many of the programs and resources directed toward the eradication of domestic violence remain underfunded. Domestic violence has become better understood as a pattern of actions, rather than a case of simple assault, as well.

Where battering a wife may have once seemed like the only relevant aspect of the crime, agencies that work to help the victims of and prevent abuse now recognize that domestic violence is defined by its warning signs as much as by an act of physical assault. Controlling behaviors, verbal abuse, threats of violence and sexual abuse are now recognized by most researchers as being a part of domestic abuse rather than being symptoms of it (Buzawa, p. 16). Interestingly, this sort of behavior on the part of the

male partner fits neatly within the sort of behavior that would be expected from one with a patriarchal ideology.

While credit for these changes is often, and rightly, given to the power of social movements, particularly feminism, in this case others note that the most progressive changes, such as those seen in the US, occur in nations where feminism is not necessarily accepted into the general government and where its power is that of the outside agitator. Where women's groups enjoy autonomy from the state and dominant political parties, they are able to raise public consciousness about their favored issues and slowly build strong social pressures for change.

Where women's movements are dominated by states or political parties, women's concerns become co-opted by the prevailing political system and receive a low priority. In the absence of strong outside pressure from autonomous women's groups, state policies are likely to be weak and ineffective (Hawkins, 2002). A problem, however, with making the legal/rational authorities the primary means of stopping domestic violence is that they are restricted to making contact with the victim after the abuse has already occurred.

In cases where the abuse has escalated to its most horrific-possible level, this may be a question of life and death. Such restrictions may also work to define domestic violence as an act of simple assault. Consider cases where domestic violence may be of the spontaneous sort. How are the police to identify victim and perpetrator? Even in cases where the violence stems from

a patriarchal arrangement, it may be difficult to identify this if the victim had decided to physically defend herself against her attacker.

In these cases, police may arrest no one, as there is no evidence of a crime in the sense that there is no clearly-defined victim and perpetrator or they may decide to arrest both parties, subjecting the victim to the additional stress of being booked (Buzawa, p. 5). Although this is obviously an unintended outcome of laws intended to protect women from abuse, it could conceivably prevent a woman from calling the police to help or cause her to resent a third-party whose well-intentioned intervention may have resulted in her arrest. There may be an upside to the legal response that is not well-publicized.

Male abusers oftentimes claim that the legal system is biased toward the woman (Anderson, 2001). This may be an attempt to characterize the legal system as having overreached its rational bounds when the batterers in question were arrested, a means for them to pawn off responsibility for the consequences of their actions on a third party, but it could, hopefully, make them think twice about committing future acts of violence against their partners, provided their partners haven't finally freed themselves of the batterer in question. Their notions of patriarchy are, apparently, no longer supported by society at large.

There exists a final element that plays into the effectiveness of domestic violence law and its enforcement, a question with which sociologists still contend: What constitutes a family? Which crimes may be defined as domestic violence vary from place to place depending on the law in question.

The relationships included under these acts vary state to state, sometimes only including married individuals or, alternatively, including some or all of the following current and past intimate partners, anyone living in the same residence, children, siblings, any other “ family members” and any relative (Buzawa, p.)

This could seem to create obvious problems for modern couples who choose not to marry. The difference between a batterer being arrested for simple assault and being arrested for domestic abuse may mean that the victim may or may not receive counseling, interviewing or be availed of the special resources designed to deal with these specific situations. It is important to keep in mind the recurrent nature of patriarchal terrorism and its tendency to escalate over time.

If the next incident is both inevitable and likely to be worse, it seems imperative that the crime is identified correctly for what it is. Conclusions Domestic violence as it exists in relationships where the male adheres to patriarchal notions of male/female relations and where he defines his masculinity by his capacity to wield violence as a means of control are those in which the violence is likely to escalate to the point of being deadly. The violence, however, is generally preceded and accompanied by other acts designed to break down the woman’s psyche and self-image.

Controlling behavior regarding finances, her contact with friends and family, expressions of jealousy and mistrust, verbal belittling and threats of violence all play into the dynamic of abuse. In order for the male to engage in these behaviors, and especially to repeatedly engage in them, he must violate two

social norms: the norm that defines violence in general as a type of anti-social behavior and the norm that affords women a special protection from violence.

The male may find justification in patriarchal traditions that hold that the natural order is one where men are entitled to control the women in their lives. In a patriarchal relationship, the male may assume he has a right to control those aspects of a woman's life that most modern women would expect to control themselves: finances, career, friends, family, dress, self-expression and opinion.

The capacity for violence becomes realized in those situations where the female rebels against the male's assumption that he has an inherent right to control the relationship and "his" woman. The violence is often a reaction to the idea that there is a threat to his control and, thus, a threat to his masculinity. Because a large part of his gender identity may be caught up in his ability to control "his" woman, he may resort to another principal means of gender definition for such males, his capacity for violence, as a means of reaffirming his masculinity.

There also exists an ideal of femininity espoused by some conservative writers wherein submission, surrender and compliance are all hallmarks of what it is to be a woman. This femininity is marketed as a means to make a relationship more harmonious, which would tend to agree with the idea that most violent incidents result from the woman's rebelling against the implied boundaries imposed by her husband.

By accepting the boundaries inwardly and encouraging him to demonstrate traditional “manliness”, the woman may avoid the sort of confrontations that lead to violence, at least in the short term. However, because domestic violence is really a pattern of controlling/threatening behavior, rather than simple assault, it is likely that the male partner will continually push boundaries, becoming ever-more controlling of his partner and making the offer of violence inevitable.

This sort of abuse tends to go on in secret, behind closed doors because it does, indeed, constitute a form of social deviance. Even historically, cruel men were often chastised for being abusive towards their partners. The social norm of protecting women against violence tends to come into play in this case and, once the abuse is known, it is likely that the woman will be encouraged to deal with the situation herself or that legal mechanisms will come into play that will make attempts to rectify the situation.

The notions of what constitutes domestic violence have changed over the years and, especially since the 1990's, there have been a great number of legal resources put in the hands of women who find themselves in abusive situations. The effectiveness and nature of these legal resources varies from place to place and many of them remain underfunded, but, despite their shortcomings, they do afford woman a means of escape and safety from their abusers.

Research has shown that, as abuse drags on, women become less likely to forgive it and men less likely to accept responsibility. The phenomena of “you made me do it” or “if only you were less...” still remain staples of

abuser excuse-making. Research has also shown that women and men who go into a relationship with a more progressive or feministic ideology tend to be vigilant in making sure that personal boundaries are respected and power is equally shared.

One would hope that the end of the patriarchal tradition and the demise of masculinity being defined as something that can be validated through the threat and actuality of physical violence would be helped along by men themselves. In cases of patriarchal terrorism, it is clearly on the shoulders of the man that violence is a constant dynamic of the relationship. For this sort of abuse to finally fade away—or at least for its frequency to be further diminished—men as well as women must come to see the ludicrous nature of traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity.

Books such as Doyle's only further to place the blame upon women and demand that they "surrender" themselves to the tyranny of an insecure man. Fortunately, the work of many feminist and other scholars gives more relevant insights into the nature of gender relations and identity. Perhaps, as those ideas continue to grow in acceptance, they will remedy both the norm that defines men as creatures defined by inevitable and terrifying violence and women as their less-capable subjects.