

**BRINGING FEMINIST SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSES OF PATRIARCHY
BACK TO THE FOREFRONT OF THE STUDY OF WOMAN ABUSE***

By

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of their contributions to some of the most important scientific advances in the field, feminist sociological analyses of various types of male-to-female violence that prioritize the concept of patriarchy have leveled off or declined in the last 12 years, especially in North America. This paper describes how mainstream work came to dominate the field and suggests a few strategies for challenging the hegemony of orthodox perspectives on sexual assault, beatings, technology-facilitated abuse and other forms of woman abuse.

Keywords

feminist, sociology, woman abuse, theory, gender

Prior to the late 1970s, many social scientific theories of violence against women centered mainly on “wife beating,” were grounded in psychology, and focused on the characteristics and behaviors of female survivors instead of male offenders (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996; Gover, Richards, & Patterson, 2018). For example, psychiatrist J. J. Gayford (1975) claimed that abused women themselves can be seen as deviant or mentally ill, thus bringing the violence upon themselves. As well, there were (and there still are) psychologists who asserted that many men beat, kill, and sexually assault women because they are mentally ill, suffer from personality disorders, or consume large quantities of alcohol (Faulk, 1977; Lion, 1977; Shainess, 1977). Due in large part to the pioneering empirical and theoretical efforts of radical feminist sociologists such as Dobash and Dobash (1979), however, there was a major shift in the late 1970s from trying to explain “What is wrong with women who are abused?” and “What’s wrong with men who abuse them” to “How do our society’s gender norms contribute to high rates of violence against women?” and “Does the differential power that males and females have in our society contribute to the problem of women abuse” (Renzetti & Bergen, 2005, p. 2)?

Feminist scholarship, activism, and practice expanded considerably since the publication of Dobash and Dobash’s (1979) seminal *Violence Against Wives* and Brownmiller’s groundbreaking (1975) *Against Our Will*, but it is beyond the scope of this article to recount all of my feminist colleagues’ significant achievements. Still, it must be emphasized here that examinations of major bibliometric databases in the behavioral science, biomedical, and legal disciplines and other types of data show that feminist sociological analyses of woman abuse that prioritize the concept of patriarchy, especially in North America, have leveled off or declined in the last 16 years. Most violence against women authors are now based in psychology, psychiatry, nursing, and medicine (DeKeseredy & Rennison, 2019; Jordan, 2009). This is not to say that

these disciplines did not also advance the field. They have, but they now dominate it in North America and in other parts of the world. What makes this highly problematic is that these ways of knowing focus more on individuals and lose sight of how broader social, cultural, political, and economic forces shape violence against women and societal reactions to its many shapes and forms. There are other criticisms of individualistic perspectives, but the chief purpose of this paper is not to repeat them, nor is it to reiterate Hunnicutt's (2009) account of the importance of carefully using the concept of patriarchy to theorize male-to-female violence. Instead, the main objective is twofold: (1) to chronicle how feminist sociological work that examines the close connection between patriarchy and violence against women got sidelined and (2) to suggest a few strategies for challenging the hegemony of mainstream perspectives on sexual assault, beatings, technology-facilitated abuse and other forms of woman abuse.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The current era is best described by Bob Pease (2019), an Australian profeminist social work scholar and activist:

In the context of a backlash against feminism, liberal feminist ideas have gained dominance. Social movement politics against men's violence informed by radical, socialist and multicultural feminism have been supplanted by liberal feminist, public health and professionalized approaches to violence prevention. Consequently, we have witnessed a deradicalization of feminism and gender analyses, strategies for engaging men that overemphasize reconstructing masculinity rather than challenging patriarchy, "a not all men" refrain from so-called "good men," and a greater acceptance of anti-feminist politics within the mainstream (p. 5).

The dominance of liberal feminism identified by Pease constitutes a major transition because of all the feminist theories, *radical feminism* played the most important role in contributing to the vast amount of violence against women research going on today (Renzetti, 2018). Radical feminists argue that the most important set of social relations is found in patriarchy. All other social relations, such as class, are secondary and originate from male-female relations (Beirne & Messerschmidt, 2014). Liberal feminists, on the other hand, assert that women are discriminated on the basis of their sex, so that they are denied access to the same political, financial, career, and personal opportunities as men (Brubaker, 2019). For them, the problem of gender inequality can be solved by clearing the way for “women’s rapid integration into what has been the world of men” (Ehrenreich & English, 1978, p. 19).

The definition of patriarchy is much debated within sociology and feminism. Here, drawing from Dobash and Dobash (1979), patriarchy is conceptualized as being made up of two elements. Structurally, the patriarchy is a hierarchical organization of social institutions and social relationships that allows men to maintain positions of power, privilege, and leadership in society. As an ideology, the patriarchy rationalizes itself. This means that it provides ways of creating acceptance of subordination not only by those who benefit from such actions, but even by those who are placed in such subordinate positions by society.

It should be noted in passing that there is one subfield of violence against women research in which radical feminism still dominates and it is the study of adult pornography and its harmful effects (DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2018). Radical feminists are not against the depiction of sex, but rather how sex is featured in *gonzo porn*. Gonzo, as Dines (2010) puts it, “depicts hard core, punishing sex in which women are demeaned and debased” (p. xi). Dines and Jensen (2007) are contemporary radical feminists who continue to follow in the pioneering

footsteps of Catharine MacKinnon (1983, 1989), Susan Brownmiller (1975), Andrea Dworkin (1981), and Diana Russell (1990).

One of the first signs of the beginning of the above scenario described by Pease is the return of using gender-neutral definitions to name women's violent experiences. Since the end of the last decade, we have seen a major growth, particularly in the United States, in the number of feminist scholars and other types of academics who use the term *intimate partner violence* (IPV).¹ As noted decades ago by feminist critics (e.g., Breines & Gordon, 1983), terms like IPV, "domestic violence," and "spousal violence" provide an inaccurate "mutual combat" image of violence in heterosexual relationships (Berk, Berk, Loseke, & Rauma, 1983). In other words, they assume that men and women are equally violent. What critics also pointed out is that gender-neutral definitions do not address who initiates the violence, variance in physical strength and fighting competence between men and women, the extent of willingness to use this violence, and whether violence is in self-defense (DeKeseredy & Hinch, 1991).

Are contemporary feminists who use the term IPV and other gender-neutral terms unaware of these criticisms? This is highly unlikely because they and others not discussed here appear in many recent publications (e.g., DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz, & Schwartz, 2017; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013). Why, then, in the words of Sheehy (2018), have they "abandoned the language of male violence against women in favor of 'gender-based violence' – a term so vague and depoliticized that it can signal many forms of violence, including violence against men" (p. 251). This point is hardly trivial because the most aggressive advocates of gender-neutral language are anti-feminist academics and activists (e.g., Dutton, 2006, 2010; Straus, 2014) who assert that women are as violent as men and who are intent on eliminating

major legislative efforts to curb woman abuse (DeKeseredy, in press; Dragiewicz & DeKeseredy, 2012).

Pease (2019) contends that the language shift stems from feminist scholars and activists being pressured to “locate themselves in the dominant discourse to enable them to gain some traction on women’s victimization. This means that they have been forced to soften their analysis or omit some aspects of their understanding of the problem” (p. 5). While the intent may have been good, feminists who returned to neutral terminology for reasons offered by Pease entered into an “unholy alliance” with neoliberal states with no interest in eliminating women’s systematic oppression (Bumiller, 2008; DeKeseredy, in press). A case in point is the Trump administration. One of its top priorities is to “reassert patriarchy” (Dragiewicz, 2008) by introducing new rules that reduce the liability of colleges and universities for investigating sexual assault claims and giving defendants the right to cross-examine survivors. Trump’s regime is also calling for institutions of higher learning to use narrower definitions of sexual harassment, relieving schools of the responsibility to investigate off-campus sexual assaults, giving schools the “flexibility” to create higher evidentiary standards, and establishing an appeals process (Green, 2018).

All of this comes at a time when many recent campus climate surveys show that at least one out of every four female undergraduate students has experienced one or more types of sexual assault during their university/college careers (DeKeseredy, 2018). Further, the above “overhaul” of rules governing sexual assault would profoundly change how schools in the U.S. meet their obligations under Title IX, which is part of the U.S. Education Amendments Act of 1972. Title IX prohibits discrimination, denial, and exclusion based on gender in all schools. As well, it was

designed to protect students victimized by sexual harassment and sexual assault (Wood et al., 2017).

Not only does the Trump government embrace both changing how colleges respond to sexual assault and using gender-neutral language, but it also rejects the notion of injurious nonphysical acts as constituting violence against women. It is well known among highly experienced feminist researchers, practitioners, and activists that woman abuse is multidimensional in nature. In other words, many survivors experience various types of harms, ranging from non-physical acts such as coercive control to physical ones like rape. Referred to by radical feminists such as Kelly (1987, 1988) as the *continuum of sexual violence*, it was, prior to Trump becoming President, officially recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women (OVAW). For example, up until April 2018, the Office defined domestic violence as:

a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180409111243/https://www.justice.gov/ovw/domestic-violence>).

Below is the current OVAW definition, which only includes acts of physical violence:

The term "domestic violence" include felony or misdemeanor crimes of violence committed by a current or former spouse or intimate partner of the victim, by a person with whom the victim shares a child in common, by a person who is cohabiting with or has cohabited with the victim as a spouse or intimate partner, by a person similarly situated to a spouse of the victim under the domestic or family violence laws of the

jurisdiction receiving grant monies, or by any other person against an adult or youth victim who is protected from that person's acts under the domestic or family violence laws of the jurisdiction (<http://archive.fo/rHB78>).

This definition is not embodied in official law or policy (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2019), but it minimizes the painful reality of many survivors' experiences. Regardless of whether they find nonphysical abuse to be more damaging than physical harms, women who are the targets of male violence are rarely only victimized by one type of assault. Rather, they typically suffer from a variety of injurious male behaviors that are included in the earlier OVWA definition (DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz, & Schwartz, 2017). For example, 80% of the 43 rural Ohio women interviewed by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2009) stated that they were victimized by two or more different types of abuse that exist on the continuum of sexual violence, a concept discussed in greater detail later in this article.

Attempts to reassert patriarchy in the U.S. certainly occurred well before Trump was elected. For instance, the claim that "women do it too" was used during President George W. Bush's tenure to undermine the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and efforts to support it (Dragiewicz, 2011). In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed VAWA, which is what the late Senator Paul D. Wellstone and his wife Sheila (2001) called "the most comprehensive anti-violence legislation to date" (p. ix). Congress reauthorized VAWA in 2000, 2005, and in 2019. The Act created new penalties for gender-related violence and new grant programs to motivate states to address "domestic violence," sexual assault, and stalking.

VAWA, due in large part to the lobbying efforts of conservative men's rights groups, now views women *and* men as victims of intimate violence and sexual assault, and it allows for the provision of services to men. This is a major swing because, as Dragiewicz (2008) notes,

VAWA “was passed in part because the existing ‘gender-neutral’ laws were not being enforced equitably in the context of the patriarchal subordination of women. Police failure to respond to men’s violence against female intimates was pervasive prior to VAWA” (p. 130).

Additionally, under Bush’s leadership, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), which is the research wing of the U.S. Justice Department, replaced the term “violence against women” with IPV and it was introduced into federal requests for grant proposals (RFP).² What is more, NIJ no longer required applicants to add social scientific theoretical frameworks to their proposals and the research requested was mainly evaluations of programs funded under VAWA using randomized clinical trials (RCT) (Jordan, 2009; NIJ, 2007). Technology-oriented research was also a top priority during this time. Though marketed by the Bush regime to be scientific and apolitical, RCS were, and continue to be, used to target feminist theories and research methods as political rather than scientific (DeKeseredy, Dragiewicz, & Schwartz, 2017).

A neo-liberal approach is now the dominant paradigm for running institutions of higher learning in many societies, one that monetizes and quantifies every aspect of university/college life (Donnermeyer & DeKeseredy, 2018; White, 2018). Consequently, effectively responding to Hunnicutt’s (2009) call for crafting a sophisticated feminist theory of woman abuse that prioritizes the concept of patriarchy is nowhere near as valued by senior administrators as obtaining outside grant support. Under enormous pressure, then, to obtain external research funds that include overhead costs, a sizeable portion of feminists with quantitative skills, almost all of whom are liberal feminists, do not criticize the current state of RFPs, but instead “go with the flow” and develop atheoretical, gender-neutral grant proposals to ensure their survival in institutions of higher learning (DeKeseredy, 2016).

There is another group of feminists that includes those who publicly identify themselves as radical, socialist, intersectional, or as other types of critical scholars (e.g., Fitz-Gibbon, Walklate, McCulloch, & Maher, 2018) who now use the term IPV. Based on her analysis of bibliometric databases, Jordan (2009) contends that this transition reflects a change in the field's operationalization of violence against women and more inclusiveness regarding the types of relationships in which violence is experienced (e.g., married and nonmarried, current and former, same and opposite gendered). Inclusivity is essential, but there are other ways of being all-encompassing that do not unintentionally align with the interests of men's rights activists (MRAs) and other conservative, heteronormative organizations consisting of "angry white men" who are experiencing *aggrieved entitlement*:

It is that sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by unseen forces larger and more powerful. You feel yourself to be left to a great promise, the American Dream, which has turned into an impossible fantasy for the very people who were *supposed* to inherit it (Kimmel, 2017, p. 18, emphasis in original).

The "American Dream" Kimmel refers to is one in which white, heterosexual men are superior to, and receive more, privileges than women, ethnic minorities, and members of the LGBTQ community. It is easy to say that "our progressive, inclusive politics and analyses are distinct from their right-wing agendas," but the reality is that in Canada, the U.S. and elsewhere, "Neutral terminology coupled with MRAs attacks on spaces and services dedicated to women survivors have facilitated a constriction of resources dedicated to women and a blurring of who does what to whom" (Sheehy, 2018, p. 251). Thus, to avoid buttressing the interests of right-wing men and the women who support them, more specific terms that describe the violent

experiences of LGBTQ community members should be seriously considered. Some examples are: “intimate violence against lesbian partners,” “intimate violence against gay partners,” and “intimate violence against trans partners.”

How scholars define any social problem helps determine research strategies that are used, the types of theories that drive data collection, and the data analysis techniques selected. Definitions are, then, “primal sociological acts or decisions” (Ellis, 1987, p. 210). Since IPV now dominates the definitional discourse on violence against women, it is not surprising that the overwhelming bulk of research about private violence that appears in major journals based in the U.S. is atheoretical and constitutes what Mills (1959) calls *abstracted empiricism* (e.g., research divorced from theory).

MOVING FEMINIST SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSES FORWARD

. . . . Renzetti (2018) reminds us that:

Unlike other perspectives, feminism is not solely a set of theories; it is also a *social movement* informed by a theoretical framework with the goal of collective action to eliminate sexism and promote gender equity in all areas of life... [F]eminist social scientists... are engaged in what sociologist Joann Miller (2011) called *purpose-driven research*... that raises public awareness, in this case, of gendered inequalities, and that produces useable knowledge that contributes to the social reconstruction of gender and gender relations so they are more equitable. Feminist researchers strive to acquire scientific knowledge through the research process that empowers individuals and groups

to act to change behaviors and conditions that are harmful or oppressive (pp. 75-76, emphasis in original).

Moving forward means being true to the above words and developing a resurgence in public efforts to use feminist empirical and theoretical work to curb woman abuse. [The author provides a number of examples of this kind of engagement.]

Much attention is now devoted to police violence against people of color in the United States. The bulk of the critical scrutiny, however, has focused almost entirely on the plight of young, heterosexual Black men. This is worrisome because many women of color and indigenous women are targets of such violence. Andrea J. Ritchie, an *intersectional feminist*, is yet one more salient public feminist role model, one who raises awareness about this major social problem through her writings, legal work, and advocacy not only about these women, but also around the criminalization of LGBTQ people of color. Her 2017 book *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color* is one of her many important efforts to, in her words, compel “us to consider what it would mean for women to no longer be invisible in the discourses of racial profiling, police brutality, mass incarceration, violence, and safety” (p. 3). Regardless of whether we are involved in academic work or praxis, Ritchie’s work tells us that we should always be conscious of who we are excluding from our work and that we are not hearing their perspectives (Gilfus et al., 1999).

Like radical feminists, intersectional feminists like Ritchie are critical of liberal feminism and cooptation, but they call for all feminists to devote considerable attention to the intersection of race/ethnicity, social class, sexuality, immigration status, and other types of inequality (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Krenshaw, 1991; Renzetti, 2018). Intersectionality is front and center in

much of the North American feminist criminological literature on male violence against Black women and Hillary Potter's (2008) *Battle Cries: Black Women and Intimate Violence* is but one major example.

The suggestions for moving forward presented here are obviously not exhaustive and there are numerous other innovative strategies to seriously consider. Moving forward, too, sometimes requires looking backward and revisiting some important contributions from the past. For example, there are sound theoretical and empirical reasons for returning to Liz Kelly's (1987, 1988) continuum of sexual violence. The strength of Kelly's offering is that it highlights the commonalities and cumulative effects of seemingly distinct abusive behaviors and it challenges the usual tendency of social scientists to theorize *about* other people, rather than *with* them (DeKeseredy, 2019; McGlynn, Rackley, & Houghton, 2017). In fact, for numerous women, nonphysical and physical assaults "seep into one another" (Ptacek, 2016, p. 128). Consider that DeKeseredy, Schwartz, Nolan, Mastron, and Hall-Sanchez's (2019) campus climate survey found that many female students experienced *polyvictimization*, which means having been targeted by multiple victimizations of different kinds of behaviors located on the continuum of sexual violence, not just multiple experiences of the same type of abuse (Mitchell, Segura, Jones, & Turner, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

There will probably be some, or much, disagreement with the historical section of this article. This is not a problem and there should be constructive criticism of this chronicle. As Michalowski (1996) states in his analysis of the story of critical criminology, "This is all to the

good. I increasingly suspect that we can arrive a useful truth by telling and hearing multiple versions of the same story” (p. 9). Though many readers may take issue with the presentation of events described earlier, it is doubtful that they would disagree with the fact that feminist work on how patriarchy shapes violence against women and societal reactions to it is thinning, especially in North America. As well, in this neo-liberal era, it is widely known that many who oppose feminist inquiry perpetuate myths about feminist schools of thought and are heavily involved in a process of demonstrating that their perspectives on woman abuse are more authoritative. They, too, are getting stronger every day because it is their voice – not those of feminists or survivors – that is the loudest.

There are some reasons to be optimistic and one is the powerful impact of the #MeToo movement which reinvigorated and heavily publicized the feminist sociological argument that woman abuse is a widespread social problem. It is essential to build on this energy and avoid just bemoaning the state we are currently in. Collaboration and communication, again, are also key tools that will help revitalize feminist work on violence against women. There are, of course, other useful strategies and a multi-pronged approach is necessary. Until the time comes when we witness a new surge in feminist analyses of patriarchy and its influence on violence against women, in addition to doing much to advance the field, we must also constantly remind each other that we are doing good scholarship. Yet, we must also keep in mind the words of Australian feminist political economist Jacqui True (2012): “Researching violence against women – the point is to end it” (183).

[Notes & References Omitted]