A Working Analysis of Women's Use of Violence in the Context of Learning, Opportunity, and Choice

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A Working Analysis of Women's Use of Violence in the Context of Learning, Opportunity, and Choice

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This article explores women's uses of violence by bringing together feminist sociopolitical analysis and bell hooks's concept of patriarchal violence in the home. The voices of women from diverse backgrounds, sexual orientations, and ethnicities illustrate each of the three components (learning, opportunity, and choice) of Zemsky's and Gilbert, Poorman, and Simmons's model of domestic violence. The ideas emerging from this initial exploration of the issue lend support to the importance of contextualizing individual acts of violence within frameworks that include, among other elements, ethnicity and sexual orientation. The authors emphasize the importance of inviting the voices of women who have been affected by intimate partner violence to guide the ongoing dialogue and exploration of this social issue.

As always, it was the women who asked us to do it. More than a decade ago, immigrant women in the first support group for Spanish-speaking abused women in Georgia pointed out the need for special programs—rather than child care services—for their children. Some time later, they asked that we begin an intervention group for Latino men who batter because all of them wanted the violence in their lives to stop, but very few wanted to leave their relationships. In both cases, they were undaunted by our arguments that we knew nothing about working with child witnesses of domestic violence and much less about working with

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batterers. They noted that we had learned to work with abused women and so could also learn the skills needed for this new challenge in our community. They were right, of course. We learned not only about working with children and men but also about the wisdom of the women. Now they were again challenging our well-deserved (we thought) comfort zone. The women who had been coming to the support and reflection group for several months (for some, several years) indicated that they needed a place in which women who were not in immediate crisis could talk to one another about the ways in which they themselves used violence. They saw this dynamic as detrimental to their growth as human beings.

The Latina women's awareness of the need for safe spaces in which to explore the issue of women's use of violence was not an isolated case in our city. African American and Caucasian women had also been talking about their use of violence. In our work as domestic violence educators in schools, jails, and training programs in the community, we listened to women refer to this issue as they spoke about strategies to create violence-free lives for themselves and their children. We heard this topic when working on a domestic violence crisis line. As counselors and facilitators of support groups for abused women, we listened as women repeatedly brought up their use of violence in their lives. These were women of all ages, in relationships with either men or women.

Their words resonated with thoughts that had been going through our minds, ideas that we had cautiously and slowly begun to formulate out loud among friends and our colleagues who worked with battered women. Verbalizing the reality that we saw in both the women who attended our programs and in ourselves was a scary proposition. Unhindered by theories, philosophies, or academic frameworks regarding what violence is all about, the people with whom we work broke yet another silence and gave voice to women's use of violence. Encouraged and challenged by their words, a group of long-term women's advocates, all self-described feminists, began to meet on a regular basis to share stories, experiences, and ideas with one another.

This article is the product of our initial collective exploration into the topic of women's use of violence. Guided by the voices of women with whom we worked, we opted to include in our dialogues and analyses not only intimate partner violence but also

other ways in which women use violence within their families, including child and elder abuse. We made this decision after considerable reflection and discussion, being fully aware of the existing concerns about bringing into the analysis of women's use of violence abuse that happens outside of adult intimate partnerships. The argument for proceeding in this manner, however, was a convincing one. Regardless of their ethnicity or the setting in which we came into contact with them, the women with whom we worked consistently brought up as an issue of serious concern their use of violence not only against their partners and boyfriends who battered them but also against their children and, at times, other family members (e.g., siblings, cousins, sisters-in-law). Despite the additional complexity and potential controversy, we decided to explore the issue of women's use of violence from the perspective of what bell hooks (2000) called "patriarchal violence in the home" (p. 61). As hooks defines it, patriarchal violence in the home is closely linked to the sexism and male domination present in our society and acceptance of the use of coercive force by a more powerful individual to control others. It includes male violence against female partners, same-gender violence, female violence against male partners (except in the case of self-defense, as this would not constitute the use of coercion), and adult violence (from men and women) against children. In addition, we wanted to bring in the issue of context into our analysis, as each individual act of violence requires an understanding of the complex interactions of the many elements in a person's history, resources, and environment. We believe that this more inclusive exploration of the phenomenon of abuse in the domestic sphere will enhance our understanding of the realities of women's lives as it relates to their use of violence.

This article is based on extensive discussions of existing ideas and theories regarding intimate partner violence, feminist writings from the United States and Latin America, and our own understandings of how the voices and experiences of women with whom we worked fit into current frameworks. Our data were not systematically collected as part of a research project. Rather, our ideas and observations are based on a compilation of women's stories and experiences that we have collectively accumulated for more than a decade.[1] Our workgroup emerged as an attempt to address the need for a more in-depth understanding of

women's use of violence. We offer this writing as a starting point to the essential dialogue that must ensue among feminists regarding this vital topic.

THE WORKGROUP

The core group of women who began meeting on a regular basis is made up of three Caucasians and a Latina. Three of us identify as lesbians and one as a straight woman. One member of the workgroup works as a community educator and coordinator of an intervention program for women who partner with women,[2] one is a therapist specializing in women who have experienced sexual assault, and two are on the faculty of a state university. The academicians are a social worker who has worked for years on the board of a batterers intervention program and a clinical community psychology researcher who coordinates a comprehensive domestic violence intervention program for Latino families. Our ages range from the mid-30s to the mid-50s, and we all have worked directly with abused women. At different times, other women have joined our group; among them are two women of African descent who work in the community with battered women, and a graduate student in community psychology. Our interest was both professional and personal. We became interested in this topic not only because of what we heard from other women but also because in our personal lives we had either been the victims and/or perpetrators of domestic violence. As advocates, our incentive was to address the increasing numbers of dual arrests in domestic violence cases in our city and nation and also to explore the issue of violence among couples of women who partner with women.

We began—as the women in the groups had done—by sharing our own experiences of violence in our personal lives and in the lives of women with whom we have worked in professional capacities as counselors, educators, and intervention workers. We then decided to conduct a literature review to understand the issues that other researchers had identified and that we had encountered in our work. The following section provides a summary of current social science literature regarding the use of violence by women in intimate relationships.

CURRENT CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF THE ISSUE

As Shamita Das Dasgupta (2002) pointed out, a recent and disconcerting challenge to the anti-violence against women movement is emerging as more dual arrests and women-only arrests are reported around the country. Although some people use this trend to add support to the gender symmetry framework of family violence (Steinmetz, 1981; Stets & Straus, 1990; Straus & Gelles, 1986; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980), women's advocates and practitioners are concerned about the manner in which this trend is negatively affecting society's perception of violence against women. The issue of women's use of violence is a long-standing but seemingly increasing controversy. From this ongoing argument, two distinct "camps" have emerged, based on whether a family systems approach or a feminist framework is used for understanding violence. Family violence frameworks present spousal abuse as part of a pattern of violence among all family members (Stets & Straus, 1990; Straus, 1993; Straus et al., 1980). In contrast, feminist theories place gender-based power at the center of analysis, seeing the inequality in these relationships as potential risks for violence (Bograd, 1984; Kurz, 1989).

It is important to note here that, in general, proponents of neither camp have attempted to conceptualize intimate partner violence from a comprehensive perspective that would include sexual orientation and culture. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of studies have been conducted with samples that are not reflective of today's increasingly diverse U.S. population.

Although as a social issue, domestic violence is best approached from a community perspective (thus supporting the idea of taking an ecological approach to the issue) (Edleson & Tolman, 1992), researchers have generally used a narrow approach to the study of this topic. For example, family systems research has focused, through its use of the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS), on counting the frequency of violent acts without attending to the context in which intimate partner violence occurs. On the other hand, as Renzetti (1999) pointed out, Western (European American) feminists, although bringing in a more comprehensive analysis of the problem, have focused primarily on male-female relationships, thus leaving aside the exploration of the violence that occurs in same-gender[3] couples or that which is perpetrated

by both male and female family members against women in some ethnic groups.

FAMILY SYSTEMS RESEARCH

Family systems researchers (e.g., Gelles, 1985, 1993; Gelles & Straus, 1988; Stets & Straus, 1990; Straus, 1993, 1997, 1999; Straus et al., 1980) contend that the structure of the family in the United States is affected by societal stressors that make family members use violence against one another. They suggest that abusive behavior is modeled for males in their family of origin (Straus et al., 1980). The privacy that is accorded the family allows no outside scrutiny and, as a result, violence that has been modeled and accepted in society is allowed to happen within the family.

Systemic formulations of family violence assume that wife battering happens as a result of repetitive behaviors in which a couple engages, within families that have certain relationship structures, and that violence may have a functional role in maintaining the marital system (Bograd, 1984). Here, the role of sexism in family violence is acknowledged, citing the power of men over women given by the sexist organization of society and its replication within family systems. Family system theorists see women as being as responsible as men for violence within the family because, from their perspective, "power can as equally be held by a wife as by a husband" (Kurz, 1989, p. 494). The most powerful family member uses violence as a way to maintain the dominant position. It is recognized, however, that women are more seriously victimized than men and thus deserve special attention (Kurz, 1989).

A considerable number of quantitative studies (including large national surveys) that have explored the issue of violence in intimate relationships have found that men's and women's use of violence have comparable prevalence rates (e.g., Arias, Samios, & O'Leary, 1987; Brush, 1990; Caulfield & Riggs, 1992; DeKeseredy, Saunders, Schwartz, & Alvi, 1997; D. G. Dutton, 1994; Macchietto, 1992; Moffit & Caspi, 1999; Sorenson & Telles, 1991; Steinmetz, 1977-1978, 1981; Steinmetz & Lucca, 1988; Straus, 1993, 1997; Straus et al., 1980; Straus & Gelles, 1986; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Other studies have found that women may at times use violence against their partners more often than men do (e.g.,

DeMaris, 1992; Gryl, Stith, & Bird, 1991; Stets & Straus, 1990). For example, the 1985 National Family Violence Survey (Straus, 1993) of 6,002 couples found that minor assaults per 1,000 couples were 78 by wives and 72 by husbands, whereas major assaults per 1,000 couples were 46 and 50, respectively; for all assaults, assaults by wives were 124, and assaults by husbands were 122. None of the differences was statistically significant. The majority of studies that have found this gender symmetry have used the CTS (Straus, 1979) or the revised scale (CTS-2) (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Other researchers and advocates (Brush, 1993; Currie, 1998; Dasgupta, 2002; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Kimmel, 2002; Kurz, 1993) have critiqued these scales for a number of reasons, including the fact that they ask respondents to report only the number of times they have used and/or been victims of intimate partner violence in the previous 12 months. The scales contain no questions regarding the context in which violence has occurred nor the outcomes of such acts (Renzetti, 1999). Almost all studies have been conducted in English using an instrument that has some cross-cultural norms but no thorough validation of conceptual equivalency across different ethnic groups. As Dasgupta (2002) noted, the CTS ignores the influence that ethnicity and culture can have on the context and meaning of intimate partner violence. For example, the severity of violence in the CTS is rated in a set rank order constructed within U.S./European standards that is not appropriate across cultures. In addition, the CTS has limited sensitivity in terms of emotional abuse and cannot register violent behaviors that have different and important meanings in diverse cultures (e.g., spitting at someone, throwing liquid at someone's face).

It is also important to note here that family systems researchers have approached the problem of intimate partner violence in the United States as if families in this country were monolithic in nature. Overwhelmingly, there is no discussion of the importance of diversity in terms of culture, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or other diversity variables. Despite the undeniable and rapidly increasing heterogeneity of the U.S. population, family systems researchers still approach the study of intimate partner violence from a very narrow perspective, leaving aside contextual

elements that may have important implications in our understanding of this phenomenon.

FEMINIST RESEARCH

Western (European American) feminist frameworks of violence against women view the unequal distribution of power in the structure of male-female relationships (Bograd, 1984) as the root of wife/partner battering. Goldner and her colleagues (Goldner, Penn, Sheinber, & Walker, 1990) see battering as a man's attempt to reassert gender differences and gender dominance. Rigid gender expectations still at work in many segments of our society portray the woman as the caretaker of the home and the man as primary breadwinner, even in cases in which both partners work outside the home (Abalos, 1986; Coltrane & Valdez, 1997; Dobash & Dobash, 1978). This socially prescribed division of labor and responsibilities enhances the power imbalance in the male-female relationship and paves the way for domestic violence to occur. Western feminist formulations of domestic violence undoubtedly provide a much broader perspective from which to explore the contexts of violence in intimate relationships. By bringing in issues of societal norms and values, Western feminist theories have added a valuable tool with which to explore more fully the complex phenomenon of intimate partner violence, thus providing information important to the design and implementation of community interventions. Indeed, most generally accepted programs for women who are abused and for men who batter are based on feminist formulations of domestic abuse (see, e.g., Adams, 1988; Edleson & Tolman, 1992; Yllö & Bograd, 1988).

In contrast to family systems studies, research on gender differences of contextual elements of intimate partner violence have typically been conducted with small, nonrandom samples of battered women or men who batter or, in a few cases, with both partners (e.g., Barnett, Lee, & Thelan, 1997; Cascardi & Vivian, 1995; Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1998; Stets, 1988). Some of these studies have used versions of the CTS in addition to in-depth interviews to explore contextual issues of violence. Results suggest that men and women have different motives for using

violence in their relationships. Men are more likely to use violence when they perceive themselves losing control or when they believe there is a challenge to their authority, whereas women most often use violence in self-defense or to fight back when being attacked (Renzetti, 1999).

Western feminist theories of abuse have been criticized for focusing solely on men's violence against women because this perspective cannot account for women's use of violence in both heterosexual and lesbian intimate relationships (hooks, 2000; Renzetti, 1999). This has led to a call for stretching feminist parameters, even "moving beyond feminism" by analyzing this issue as a human problem rather than a gender problem (D. G. Dutton, 1994; Pearson, 1997; Wolf, 1993). Although this stance appears to have some merit at first glance, a more in-depth analysis of this position points to its problematic nature. For one, as Renzetti (1999) suggested, despite all we still have to learn about the issue of intimate partner violence in heterosexual relationships, we do know that it is gendered. Feminists as well as family systems researchers have found strong evidence that the violence of men and women against intimate partners is qualitatively and quantitatively different. Females and males in our society are socialized in gender-specific ways that mirror our communities' beliefs and expectations about their respective roles. As a result, the worldviews of men and women contain elements that are gender-specific and help shape the context of their daily lives. Context thus becomes the central focus of analysis when examining the motive, meaning, and consequences of violence within the entire relationship. This is essential in order to ascertain whether violence is used as a coercive force to gain and maintain control of another person (i.e., battering), as a strategy for self-defense, or in another context. Exploring the contextual meaning of individual acts of violence requires a more complex analysis of the issue than has been the norm thus far.

Feminist theories provided a lens from which to begin the exploration of intimate partner violence by maintaining gender as the central focus of analysis. In addition, however, feminists of color in the United States (e.g., Anzaldua & Moraga, 1983; hooks, 2000; Smith, 1983; White, 1985) as well as Third World feminists (e.g., Duarte, 1995; Duarte & González, 1994; Lagarde, 1996) have used an even more complex and in-depth analysis of intimate

partner violence that includes the intersectionality of historical, social, economic, religious, class, and ethnic/racial elements, among others. This more comprehensive approach to the exploration of domestic violence reflects many of the ideas that social scientists in the United States (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; M. Ramírez, 1983) and Latin America (e.g., Cárdenas de Santamaría, 1990; Martín-Baró, 1994) have emphasized regarding the need to bring into the study of human beings the political, social, historical, sexual, economic, and spiritual realms of their realities (Perilla, 1999). In other words, understanding the interactions of elements present in a person's or group of people's environment or ecology is fundamental for both theory and practice.

To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics, contexts, and effects of intimate partner violence, ecological formulations of the issue have been presented (Carlson, 1984; Dasgupta, 2001, 2002; D. G. Dutton, 1994; M. A. Dutton, 1996; Edleson & Tolman, 1992; Heise, 1998; Pence & Paymar, 1993; Perilla, 1999; Perilla, Bakeman, & Norris, 1994). Ecological frameworks allow a broad theoretical perspective that includes the interactions of social, historical, institutional, cultural, and individual elements in the study of intimate partner violence.

One factor that is almost totally absent from even the most complex analyses to date, however, is the role of sexual orientation. Research has overwhelmingly focused on heterosexual relationships, leaving the exploration of violence in same-gender intimate partnerships to the few studies that have concentrated exclusively on these populations.

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN SAME-GENDER RELATIONSHIPS

The question of whether violence in same-gender relationships is the same or different from that which occurs in heterosexual relationships is an increasingly debated topic.

Western feminist theories of domestic violence have been found to have important limitations when attempting to explain the prevalence of violence in relationships of women who partner with women. As Eaton (1994) noted, the essentialist stance of feminist theory, which emerged from within a White, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied context, posits a woman who is

determined primarily by her gender, without taking into consideration other systemic subordinations based on her ethnicity/race, class, and sexual orientation. This privileged position has left out the experience and realities of large numbers of women who do not fit this context, including women who partner with women. As a result, feminist theories of domestic violence, by and large, have relegated context to the background of the discourse (Eaton, 1994). In addition to the apparently universal psychological impact that battered women share regardless of the gender of their partner, Eaton (1994) pointed to the unique experience of lesbians of being largely invisible in society and the connection of battering to this notion of "erasure" (p. 219). Battering increases the difficulty of the coming-out process as the sexual orientation of lesbians is often used by their abusive partners as a coercive control tool. Eaton suggested that any theory of intimate partner violence must include the phenomenon of invisibility if it is to explain more fully the experience of battering of women who partner with women.

Elliott (1996) took a different route to the issue of same-gender intimate partner violence and stated that the routine and intentional use of intimidation tactics in relationships is not a gender issue but rather a power issue. She suggested that as sexism creates an opportunity for heterosexual men to batter women, homophobia creates an opportunity for people in same-gender relationships to batter their partners. In both cases, there is the opportunity to batter in addition to the batterer's perceived freedom from serious consequences. However, in same-gender relationships it may be even more difficult for someone who is being abused to seek help because of societal, familial, and/or personal risks involved in this double coming-out as a lesbian or gay man and as a victim of domestic violence.

The misuse of the differential power held by partners is present in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. What differs, however, is the source of the power differential. Whereas in heterosexual relationships gender is overwhelmingly the defining factor, power in same-gender couples may be a function of one or more variables interacting with one another, such as education, class, work status, ethnicity, earning potential, immigration status, and age. In addition, the power differential can also depend on the extent to which each person in the relationship can count

on the support and understanding of her family, friends, employers, and others to accept her sexual orientation. The potential interaction among different variables in the construction of power in same-gender couples can be discerned more easily than in heterosexual relationships due to the absence of gender as a precipitating factor. However, as Elliott (1996) and others (e.g., hooks, 2000) pointed out, this complex dynamic is present in all relationships and may manifest itself as male violence against female partners, child or elder abuse, or domestic violence in same-gender couples. hooks (2000) proposed the term "patriarchal violence," rather than domestic violence, as a label for the type of abuse that happens in the home and that is the result of patriarchal structures, beliefs, and values based on power differentials. She prefers the term "patriarchal violence" because of its use as a reminder of the connection between the violence that happens in the home to sexism and male domination. Like Elliott, hooks believes that misuse of power, rather than gender per se, is at the root of violence in relationships.

Some writers (e.g., Gilbert, Poorman, & Simmons, 1990; Hart, 1986; Zemsky, 1990) have attempted to use a feminist analysis of domestic violence to explain the occurrence of violence in same-gender intimate partnerships. In doing so, there is always the risk of fueling common myths about violence in same-gender intimate partnerships. The following are among common misconceptions regarding same-gender domestic violence: (a) Gay male violence is logical because men are violent and violence is uncommon in lesbian relationships because women are nonviolent; (b) same-gender partner violence is not as severe as that which men perpetrate against their female partners; (c) because both partners are of the same gender, it is mutual abuse; and (d) as a reflection of heterosexual domestic violence, the perpetrator in homosexual couples must be the "man" or "butch" and the victim must be the "woman" or "femme" (Merrill, 1996). These myths are dangerous because they cloud the reality of intimate partner violence in same-gender couples.

As Aldarondo (1998) noted, studies conducted in the 1990s (e.g., Kanuha, 1990; Margolies & Leeder, 1995) suggest that the prevalence of physical violence in lesbian and gay relationships may be similar to that of heterosexual couples. As in heterosexual couples, however, prevalence rates in homosexual couples show

the same variation across studies. Rates of violence among women who partner with women have been found to vary from a low of 7% (Bryant & Demian, 1994) to a high of 60% (Lie, Schilit, Bush, Montagne, & Reyes, 1991). Studies of gay men are even more scarce than those of lesbians, with findings ranging from 11% to 20% in a study by Island and Letellier (1991) (in which they extrapolated from rates of intimate partner violence and numbers of gay men to arrive at the above estimates) to a high of 44% found by Bologna, Waterman, and Dawson (as cited in Turrell, 2000). The tremendous discrepancy in prevalence rates is largely due to methodological and sampling issues. Burke and Follingstad (1999) indicated that among the problems found in studies of same-gender intimate partner violence are (a) a lack of a clear definition of abuse and (b) difficulties obtaining accurate estimates due to underreporting of abuse, problems obtaining gay and lesbian samples, and potential response biases. In addition, Turrell (2000) stated that most studies of lesbian battering have used participants who are White, middle class, and well educated. As Turrell noted, random sampling of these populations is impossible due to the hidden nature of potential participants and the fact that only those people who self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered can participate in studies. As a result, she suggests caution when interpreting results because they may not be an accurate portrayal of the entire gay/lesbian populations.

Despite the widely varying statistics regarding same-gender couple violence, what is clear is that the problem is as serious and urgent in these populations as it is in heterosexual relationships and thus merits a more thorough and in-depth exploration than it has been given thus far. As Elliott (1996) pointed out, for example, the myth of mutual battering belies the fact that in any particular instance, there has to be a predominant aggressor who misuses power to control his or her partner. This power emerges not only as a result of physical size or gender role within a couple but also as a function of personal characteristics and circumstances (e.g., finances, education, age, immigration status). The analysis of violence that happens in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships, as well as the influence of culture and other factors, requires a model that will allow the inclusion of societal and personal variables that affect the occurrence of abuse.

INTEGRATING MODELS AND THEORIES OF PATRIARCHAL VIOLENCE

Merrill (1996) made a case for integrating feminist sociopolitical theory with psychological theory to obtain a more comprehensive framework that facilitates the exploration of violence with gender as only one of its elements. Feminist sociopolitical theory sees domestic violence as the logical and extreme outcome of gender role socialization in which learning is a central component. Men learn that violence is a viable option and that they are in charge of all members of their family. At the same time, women learn that they must assume a subordinate role and become caretakers. This analysis portrays domestic violence as a gender-based phenomenon, a socially based malaise, and a tool used by the patriarchy to keep women in their place (Merrill, 1996).

This gender-based theory has had wide acceptance as an explanation of heterosexual intimate partner violence among advocates, the anti-domestic violence movement, and academicians. It explains the phenomenon in a coherent manner and reflects the fact that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, battering in intimate relationships is perpetrated by men against women. As stated previously, however, Western feminist sociopolitical theory does not account for other types of violence that happen within the domestic realm, including same-gender intimate partner violence and the abuse that parents often perpetrate against their children.

Zemsky (1990) and Gilbert et al. (1990) developed an integrated theory of battering that encompasses opposite-gender and same-gender relationships. They suggested three elements within the context of violence that affect its occurrence: (a) learning to abuse, (b) opportunity to abuse, and (c) choosing to abuse. The combination of this theory with Elliott's (1996) statement regarding the parallel effects of sexism and homophobia on intimate partner violence, as well as hooks's (2000) ideas regarding patriarchal violence, provide a framework for understanding the issue in a much broader manner than has been possible thus far.

The members of the workgroup wanted to build on the feminist work that has been done to date, placing gender and power at the center of analysis, while expanding the frameworks currently being used. Instead of looking at separate pieces of the ecology of

violence (i.e., a count of individual acts of violence, or only the role of gender), the intention was to explore the issue from a more comprehensive understanding of the nature and interaction of contextual elements at work in the environment in which violence happens. The authors are aware that the inclusion of women's use of violence against their children and elders in our discussion would be enhanced by a thorough review of the literature regarding these issues. Due to the additional length needed for such a review, however, we decided to forego its inclusion in this exploratory article. Such review is beyond the scope of this article, but we believe it is a necessary element in future discussions of this topic.

The workgroup used the framework provided by Zemsky (1990), Gilbert et al. (1990), Elliott (1996), and hooks (2000) to guide the exploration of the issue of women's use of violence. The remainder of this article will present a discussion of each of the three elements in the model (learning, opportunity, and choice) as they have been used to contextualize women's voices regarding their use of violence.

LEARNING VIOLENCE

Family systems researchers as well as feminist writers emphasize the role of modeling in learning intimate partner violence (Bowker, Arbitell, & McFerron, 1988; hooks, 2000; Kurz, 1989; Perilla & Pérez, 2002; A. Ramírez, 1999; Straus, 1983; Straus et al., 1980). In addition, other writers have pointed out the use of violence as a viable tool for the dominant person or persons to maintain power within a family (Abalos, 1986; hooks, 2000; Lagarde, 1997; Merrill, 1996). The most powerful family members often use violence in its many forms against the less powerful. This patriarchal violence in the home, as hooks (2000) indicated, results in male violence against women, same-gender intimate partner violence, and parents' physical and emotional abuse against their children. The coercive force that is present in all types of patriarchal violence in the home is a key factor in learning violence.

Many of the theories used to understand batterers' behavior and motivations use learning as an explanatory framework (Corsi, Dohmen, & Sotés, 1995; Edleson & Tolman, 1992; Gelles, 1985; A. Ramírez, 1999). Theorists argue that violence is modeled

for children in homes in which intimate partner violence is present as well as in the direct experience of being abused as a child (hooks, 2000; A. Ramírez, 1999). The use of violence as a means to assert and/or maintain control is supported by societal structures including family, communities of faith, the media, sports, and schools. The effectiveness of violence in changing the victim's behavior is an extremely efficient reinforcer for the perpetrator, for whom the violence often has few, if any, immediate negative consequences. In families in which violence is present, children begin to see this power dynamic as a normal part of relationships. It is not surprising, then, that any person can learn to use power abusively, as Hart (1986) noted. Unpublished data from our work with a Latino population indicate that 90% to 95% of males in batterers intervention groups and approximately 80% to 85% of women in support groups witnessed violence in their families of origin. The connection between domestic violence and childhood witnessing of violence in the home is undeniable. What is not yet clear are the ways in which gender interacts with such variables as race/ethnicity, age, religious/spiritual beliefs, and socioeconomic status in the learning and subsequent use of violence in relationships.

As Merrill (1996) stated, feminist sociopolitical theory is a good starting point in our understanding of intimate partner violence. However, it still leaves "many experiences invisible" (p. 12), including that of heterosexual men who do not batter their partners as well as the dynamics present in same-gender intimate partner violence. Also, the exclusion of other forms of oppression in addition to sexism prevents the theory from fully reflecting the reality of people of color and immigrants and refugees in the United States. Finally, the theory's exclusive focus on gender leaves out the violence that is often perpetrated by parents against their children—an issue that, in our experience, many battered women see as inextricably related to intimate partner violence. The model proposed by Zemsky (1990) and Gilbert et al. (1990) offers a promising enhancement to feminist sociopolitical theory of domestic violence. The inclusion of the three elements of learning, opportunity, and choice in the model expands the potential for understanding the antecedents and dynamics of violent acts.

The voices of women from diverse backgrounds with whom workgroup members have worked for more than a decade

provided an opportunity to test the viability of this model. For example, Rochelle, a 29-year-old Caucasian woman who was participating in a community-based training program for construction workers, helped to clarify the role of learning in a situation in which a woman who had been a victim of violence in one relationship became a perpetrator in a subsequent relationship. Rochelle was married for 9 years to a man who controlled her every move. Her husband was arrested five times for beating her before he was sent to prison for 7 years. Rochelle divorced her abuser and is in a new relationship. Now she is abusive with her current partner, a woman. "I am doing the same things to her as he did to me. I need help," she told the community educator. Rochelle learned from personal experience with her husband that violence was effective in controlling a person's behavior. In her new relationship, the power dynamics have changed because gender difference is no longer an issue. In ways similar to her former partner, Rochelle uses violence to control her new partner's outside contacts with people whom she perceives as threatening their relationship. In contrast to most male batterers, however, Rochelle spontaneously disclosed her use of violence and asked for help. In the authors' experience, many women who have used violence against their intimate partners also express fear and anxiety about discovering their own potential for violent behavior. This is an important consideration when planning and implementing interventions for women who are the predominant aggressors[4] or who use the most coercive tactics within their intimate relationships. The distress felt by these women can be a valuable tool for exploring the personal consequences of their violence, in addition to the effect their abuse has on their partners, their children, and society in general.

The way in which learning affects a woman's use of violence is not always quite as clear as in Rochelle's case, however. Battered women often respond in diametrically different ways to their experiences of witnessing violence against their mothers. The stories of two Latinas illustrate this point. Mercedes is a 36-year-old member of a support and reflection group for battered Spanish-speaking women. Camila is a 17-year-old high school student who spoke with a young advocate at a school presentation. Both were born in Mexico—Mercedes in a small rural community and Camila in the city of Guadalajara. Mercedes arrived in the United States 6 years ago, and Camila immigrated to this country with

her parents when she was 4 years old. When they were growing up, both saw their mothers being beaten by their fathers and were told by their mothers that it was better not to resist or fight back because things would get worse. Mercedes's partner battered her during the 11 years of their relationship and she never used violence in return. Camila's boyfriend, Luis, slapped her two months after they began dating and she responded by punching him in the face. Luis has never hit her again.

Despite their similar experiences and backgrounds, Mercedes and Camila responded to their experiences of violence in remarkably different ways, suggesting that the witnessing of violence created alternative response strategies in the two women. Mercedes told the group, "My mother never did anything because she knew things would get worse if she tried to stand up to him. I think she was right." In contrast, Camila commented to the advocate, "After that first time, Luis got the message that I wasn't gonna take it no more. I don't want to end up like my mother, who let my father beat her up." The experiences of witnessing violence as children obviously had radically different effects on the response of these two women to their own victimization.

In addition to the Western sociopolitical analysis of the role of gender socialization, it is essential to bring into the exploration of this issue the many avenues in which the learning of violence occurs for women who were childhood witnesses of intimate partner violence. An initial exploration into this issue suggests that the modeling and learning of violence that happens inside the home is only one contextual factor in the use of violence by women. Other elements in Mercedes's and Camila's ecologies can provide additional insight into this issue. The differences between rural and urban gender socialization and the social sanctions regarding the use of violence by women may be at work in this instance. Immigrants from rural populations (specifically, from Latin America in this case) tend to hold more traditional and rigid gender role expectations and values than those from urban settings, including a clear proscription against women using violent behaviors. Learning nonviolent alternatives is often limited to a passive stance based on gender role expectations. In addition, the degree of acculturation into the majority culture in the United States as well as the length of time in this country can have a

substantial impact on the effectiveness of learning violence from sources outside the home. Immigrants who come into contact with U.S. customs, values, and beliefs at an early age and/or who have been in this country for a longer period of time tend to adopt societal norms and expectations of the host culture (Marín & Marín, 1991; Triandis, Marín, Hui, Lisansky, & Ottati, 1984), perhaps including those related to the use of violence by women.

Finally, age can be an important factor in the two women's differential responses to violence. Mercedes was born and raised in a rural area and immigrated to the United States as an adult 6 years ago. The learning she received in her family and community regarding the dangers inherent in her own use of violence against her batterer appears to be unchanged. In contrast, Camila was born in a large metropolitan area and was brought to the United States as a small child. Her degree of acculturation and the time she has spent in this country have provided an awareness of options that, from her perspective, contradict her mother's warnings about the danger of responding to violence with violence. Indeed, her boyfriend's reaction to Camila's use of a violent response to his abuse serves as a reinforcer for her strategy. In addition, Camila's age places her in a cohort of young women from many ethnic groups for whom the use of violence in intimate relationships has become a viable—if potentially lethal—option.

In our workgroup, we have often discussed the increase of informal reports we have received in the past 2 years or so from young girls and women about their use of violence in dating and primary relationships. It appears that the familial and societal proscriptions against the use of violence by females are decreasing among many groups in our society. This phenomenon is reflected in the remarkable gender shift that has occurred in local juvenile detention facilities, which several of the workgroup members have had the opportunity to observe firsthand. For example, a metropolitan facility formerly used to house young boys has been converted into a detention center for girls due to the number of female adolescents entering the system. Aggressive behavior is the main reason for their detention. The violence that young people (including girls) are learning from many elements of society is being enacted in the spaces in which adolescents find themselves: schools, neighborhoods, and homes. The media, sports, and entertainment venues as well as the adults in young

people's lives are giving the message that violence is an acceptable and viable option for responding to many life situations. The workgroup has seen this societal trend reflected in (a) our anecdotal data from reports by young women from several ethnic groups about their use of violence in dating and primary relationships and (b) the rising number of young Latinas being court mandated (due to their violence against their partners) to the intervention program coordinated by one of the workgroup members. The information gained from the workgroup members' involvement with the larger anti-domestic violence community does not support the idea that young Latinas are more violent than young women of any other ethnic group. Other intervention programs serving European American and African American populations are experiencing the same pattern. Without a systematic exploration of this issue, of course, it is difficult to discern whether this trend is due to an actual increase in the use of violence by young women or whether women's violence is being given more attention by authorities and they are thus being caught more often.

Young girls in schools and other community settings are quite willing to share their history of violence and abuse as well as their own use of violence. Serena's story reflects the role of learning violence in her life. Serena is a 13-year-old African American girl who spoke with a community educator at her middle school during a talk regarding dating violence. For years, Serena saw her father beat up her mother on a daily basis. Then, as she describes it, "I got sick of it and shot him in the leg. He went to the hospital, but he never did it again. He won't because he knows I will kill him if I have to." There were no obvious consequences for Serena's use of violence. Her father took the blame for the incident, indicating that his gun had accidentally fired. As a result, the authorities were not notified. Serena's mother never talked about the shooting. Having lived with violence all her life, Serena had learned the power of violence to control other people. The worldview of this young teenager did not contain realistic options that were nonviolent. Violence was part of her everyday existence and thus a viable tool to make her father stop beating her mother. Serena's level of maturity did not allow her to weigh the potential for the violence to escalate to lethal proportions. Her violent act reinforced what she had learned from her father about the power of violence.

The experiences of the women with whom we work regarding their learning of violence lends support to the first element in the model proposed by Zemsky (1990) and Gilbert et al. (1990). It is clear, however, that learning alone cannot fully explain the use of violence by women. In the next section, we will explore the second step of the model, the opportunity for violence.

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR VIOLENCE

The climate of opportunity to use violence is created by societies that uphold values, structures, and beliefs based on violence, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. Opportunities for abuse increase when victims are isolated from family and other necessary service and support systems that could potentially provide access to safer personal circumstances. Ultimately, it is an imbalance of power understood in a sociopolitical context (issues of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, age) that creates each individual opportunity for violence.

Human beings, regardless of gender, are constantly confronted by opportunities for using the resources and means they perceive to be available to them, including violence. Women who are battered have often talked to workgroup members about experiencing severe abuse for a long period of time before seizing an opportunity to respond with their own violence. Substance abuse can at times place the batterer in a temporarily powerless position, thus creating an opportunity in which the power shifts for a short time from the batterer to the victim. Alda's story is helpful in understanding the context in which substance abuse can place a victim in a short-lived position of power over her abuser. Alda is a 29-year-old African American woman who talked to a community educator during a mandated class for women in the Department of Family and Children Services. Alda had been in a long-term relationship with her partner, an alcoholic who constantly battered her. Alda had never responded with violence until one day when her partner came home intoxicated and attempted to strangle her. She passed out for a while and when she regained consciousness, he was lying on top of her in a drunken stupor. As Alda told her story, "That's when I got the hammer. I hit him with the hammer and he had to go to the emergency room. I went to jail 'cause I didn't have no marks." Alda had sought police assistance

in the past, without results. When she almost died at her partner's hands, she was terrified about what he would do to her when he came to. Alda understood that her only opportunity to defend herself from his violence was to do so when he was passed out in a drunken stupor. Although she considered this an act of self-defense, she ended up in jail.

In addition to giving context to an opportunity in which a woman used violence, Alda's story brings up the role of the legal system in cases like hers. Alda believed that she could die at the hands of her abuser and saw her use of violence as a way to defend herself from further battering. She had sought protection from law enforcement personnel in the past but to no avail. This information was extremely important to Alda as she evaluated her options after her batterer almost killed her. Her repeated calls for help against her batterer should have been recorded and made available to the responding officer so that, despite the absence of visible marks, the officer could have information necessary to conduct a more in-depth investigation, including a thorough evaluation of whether Alda had used violence in self-defense.

As bell hooks (2000) and others (e.g., A. Ramírez, 1999) noted, adults in their parenting roles also have the opportunity to use violence. Social mores and cultural beliefs often support the use of violence by adults against their children. Indeed, hooks (2000) sees child abuse as one type of patriarchal violence in the home and the absence of a thorough analysis of the interconnections of intimate partner violence and child abuse as leaving children voiceless in the anti-violence movement. The experience of our workgroup members when working with battered women from different ethnicities and backgrounds is that one of the most common situations in which abused women report using violence is in their role as mothers. The power imbalance that exists between a woman and her children can create an opportunity for violence. In their struggle to parent children in the midst of chaos and trauma, many women who have been abused use harsh physical discipline against their children.

Of special importance in our current exploration is the distress that battered women report about their own abuse of their children. As mentioned earlier, our initial foray into this issue was the result of women requesting the opportunity to explore their use of violence against their sons and daughters. Teresa's story is typical

of the voices of women regarding this issue. Teresa is a 28-year-old woman from Nicaragua, a long-standing member of the Latina women's support and reflection group. As a child, her parents beat Teresa and her siblings with ropes, belts, and sticks. She has two daughters, 8 and 6 years old, and a 2-year-old son. She has been with Manuel, her partner, for about 15 years. Manuel used physical and emotional abuse against Teresa and the children for approximately 7 years, since they moved to the United States. Teresa has no family members in the United States. Manuel had completed a batterers intervention program and had stopped using physical violence against his family. Teresa reported that as the physical violence decreased, the emotional abuse increased in the form of extreme control. She indicated that Manuel had figured out that the police would not respond to Teresa's call for help unless there was physical abuse, so he controlled all parts of her life: whom she saw, how she spent the money he gave her, her access to a phone. Teresa was frustrated and angry with Manuel, and as she explained, "The really bad thing is that I am taking it out on the kids. They're little and can't do anything when I come after them. I hate to see myself as some kind of batterer."

Teresa's sense of guilt and shame about being violent with her children echoes the voices of many battered women. A lack of support for her parenting responsibilities, coupled with her own experience of abuse as a child and as an adult, have left Teresa with few nonviolent tools to use as the parent responsible for her children. Their ages and her status as mother create an imbalance of power that provides her with the opportunity to use violent behaviors in ways that closely resemble those of her violent partner.

In some instances, the mother may also see the batterer as a helpmate in keeping the children in line, as Janet's story illustrates. Janet is a 36-year-old European American woman who sought assistance from a women's resource center to obtain services for her son Jared, a 7-year-old diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). When talking to one of the advocates, she appeared frazzled and frustrated. She reported yelling at Jared and slapping him when he became insolent. At the center, she screamed at the boy, who was outside hitting a tree with a stick. She told the advocate, "I finally got away from his

father . . . Thank God . . . but at least he could keep him in line some of the time. Now I'm losing it."

In the absence of available nonviolent alternatives to child rearing, some battered women use the same control tools with their children that were (or continue to be) used against them. Almost invariably, however, these women express regret and guilt over their behavior. As in Teresa and Janet's cases, many other women with whom we have worked diligently seek out help when they perceive their parenting style as inadequate or potentially dangerous to their children. As a form of patriarchal violence in the home, child abuse happens as mothers at times use opportunities emerging from the power imbalance present in the parent-child relationship. In contrast to most male batterers, however, women who abuse their children are usually quite willing to take responsibility for their abusive behavior and take steps to correct it as they begin to recognize the strong connection among all forms of controlling behaviors.

In same-gender couples, homophobia and fear of outing often play a major role in the power dynamics that provide an opportunity for violence to occur. Liz and Jana's story exemplify this dynamic. Liz is a 35-year-old European American and Jana is a 37-year-old African American. Liz called the crisis line and spoke to an advocate about her plight. Although they do not identify as lesbians, Liz and Jana live together as intimate partners in a rural community. Liz teaches middle school and Jana works for a travel agency. They are worlds away from Pride Marches and rainbow flags. In fact, they must keep their relationship completely hidden from most of the people in their lives. If their sexual orientation became known in their small rural community, they could be shunned and Liz's job as a teacher would be at stake. When Liz expressed her desire to end their relationship, Jana's previously jealous and controlling behavior escalated. It was not the physical violence that most frightened Liz but Jana's words. Jana said repeatedly that she would tell the school administrators about their relationship if Liz tried to leave.

Even though Jana would have had to contend with the effects of homophobia and heterosexism, her livelihood probably would not have been affected if her sexual orientation were discovered. For Liz, however, her position as a teacher would almost defin-

itely be at risk. This imbalance of power within the relationship, based in part on the work status of each woman, created an opportune environment for Jana's abusive behavior.

Liz and Jana's story provides a clear example of the power dynamics in intimate partnerships that go beyond gender factors. The interaction of the homophobia present in the small rural community, coupled with the differential risks inherent in each woman's job, created an opportunity for violence to happen. Societal norms in this case, instead of gender or parental status, served as the context in which controlling behavior was allowed to occur.

Despite the fact that not all people who witness or experience abuse as children become batterers as adults, the learning of violence that takes place from sources inside and outside the home appears to be universal. The idea that any person, regardless of gender, has the capability of committing violent acts is a sobering thought that has not often been discussed within the anti-domestic violence movement. This stance, however, allows a broader exploration of the dynamics and context in which abuse happens within the home environment. Having explored the idea of opportunity for violence through women's stories, the next section will consider the third element in the model: the choice of using violence. From our perspective, understanding more fully the processes that lead to an individual's decision to choose violence or nonviolence is essential for the development of effective intervention strategies.

THE CHOICE TO USE VIOLENCE

Ultimately, each individual act of violence is a choice. For those of us who have worked with men who batter, this statement has become almost a mantra. We have seen the powerful effect that the awareness of this seemingly simple but profound truth can have on men who are violent and abusive. An act of violence as a choice transcends cultures, religious/spiritual beliefs, ethnicities, sexual orientations, class, education—and gender. As human beings, we are faced daily with opportunities to act in violent or nonviolent ways. The context in which we make the choice is informed by what we have learned regarding the use of violence: our individual histories, our exposure to violence, our beliefs about the meaning of violence, what we perceive as our

alternatives to violence, and what we have seen about its effectiveness. An opportunity for violence must be present, and its occurrence is usually predicated on the imbalances of power that are created within relationships. Renzetti and Miley (1996) wrote that victims of same-gender domestic violence report that perpetrating violence is not always directly associated with having more physical or social power. The choice of using violence against the partner may depend on the potential consequences of the violent acts. It will also depend on a person's willingness to use the power available to them.

The complexity of the concept of choice as it relates to women's use of violence became apparent in the discussions in our workgroup. The word itself carries the potential for its use as a tool of victim blaming, as in "it is a woman's *choice* to stay in a battering relationship" or "the woman's *choice* of clothes made her an easy target for sexual harassment." At the same time, the notion of choice is also connected to the idea of power, a concept that is central to the theme of this article.

As discussed in a previous section, power can be derived from a multitude of sources including, but clearly not limited to, gender. At times, perceived power may arise from a temporary shift in the relationship dynamics. At other times, power is the result of the availability of options. Level of education, socioeconomic status, earning potential, physical size, and family and support systems, among many other factors, increase or decrease the options (and thus the power) available to individual women. Emotional and psychological resources are also important elements in her choice. The more options and resources a woman perceives herself to have, the more alternatives she will see to the use of violence. In addition, whether a woman chooses to exercise her power and seize the opportunity to use violence often depends not only on her learning history but also on the perceived consequences of her acts.

If, in a woman's environment, there are proscriptions against the use of violence due to cultural or societal expectations and norms, she may choose a nonviolent stance. If, on the other hand, a woman believes that her use of violence may bring about a desired outcome that will either be affirmed or at least condoned by society, she may decide to be violent. In extreme cases in which a woman's life is being threatened and she kills or seriously

injures her assailant, the choice becomes incarceration or death. In cases such as these, the decision to use violence may not seem like a choice at all. Nevertheless, choosing to stay alive despite the high personal cost involved is in itself an exercise of power for the woman.

Regardless of the context in which women make the choice to use violence, there appears to be psychological and emotional consequences that, in the experience of workgroup members who have facilitated batterers groups, are usually not found in men who batter. The distress expressed by many women about their choice to use violence and their willingness to take responsibility for their violent acts is an additional cost for women and quite different from the dynamics of men who use violence. The stories of women with whom workgroup members have worked help us begin the exploration of this complex issue of choice.

Battered women participating in the Latina support groups have often reported their own use of violence. Some of them are women who believe that their partners are not likely to revert to their prior use of physical violence because of the men's experiences in the criminal justice system and/or in a batterers intervention program. In these instances, the shifts in the relationship dynamics provide an opportunity for the women's choice to use violence against their partners. Dolores's story is an example of this dynamic. Dolores is a 33-year-old woman from El Salvador whose partner had been court mandated to attend a batterers intervention program. Dolores had been a member of the women's support and reflection group for an extended period of time. She saw a great deal of violence growing up during the war in her country, both in her family's home and the community. She also had a long history of severe sexual and physical abuse at the hands of her partner, Jacinto. Jacinto stopped the physical and sexual violence when he attended a batterers intervention program but continued to control Dolores and their children. Dolores was certain that he would not hit her again, but she was still angry and hurt at the battering she had received all those years. One night, as they were making love, Jacinto said something that made Dolores very mad. As she explained to the group, "He really got me with his words, and I was so angry I bit his penis."

Dolores readily admitted to her violent behavior at a time when her partner appeared to be most vulnerable. The opportunity

presented by the decrease in her partner's violence against her was at least partly responsible for her decision to use violence against Jacinto. Moreover, her experience of sexual violence at the hands of this man modeled for her the power inherent in sexual domination. It is not surprising that, given the opportunity, Dolores chose to use a type of violence that had such symbolic meaning. As with many other women with whom workgroup members have talked, however, Dolores reported feeling guilty and ashamed.

Dolores's story clearly illustrates the three elements of the model. As a child in a country in the midst of a civil war and living in a home in which her alcoholic father regularly beat her mother and many of her siblings, Dolores learned the power of violence to subjugate and control people. During her relationship with Jacinto, her learning was reinforced by his use of violence against her. Once he stopped his physical and sexual violence, Dolores was presented with the opportunity to use violence against Jacinto. Dolores's perceived options did not include nonviolent alternatives to express the anger and resentment she felt against her partner. Violence, on the other hand, had been an integral part of her life from early on. Given the opportunity, she chose to use violence in retaliation for the battering she had experienced for so long.

In contrast to the use of violence as retaliation, a battered woman's decision to use violence may at times be prompted by a realization that it is her last resort. As an act of self-defense, battered women at times use lethal force to preempt their own demise. Our jails and prisons are full of battered women who used violence in self-defense and still ended up serving time. Brenda is one of those women. Brenda is a 34-year-old African American woman who is temporarily serving time in the county jail until she is transferred to the state prison. She was convicted of killing her boyfriend with a gun while he was asleep. After years of escalating physical and sexual abuse and emotional degradation during which Brenda had repeatedly and unsuccessfully sought assistance from the police, she decided she had to defend herself physically. Brenda's batterer was a large, strong man who had threatened to kill her if she left him. As she told the community educator during a domestic violence class in the jail, "I had to kill him. It was gonna be one of us." For many women like Brenda,

the choice to use lethal violence was viewed as the only way to stay alive. Brenda's background and history provided few options that were nonviolent. She believed that there was only one decision to be made. She took his life in order to have hers, even if it meant a life in prison. In her eyes, the cost of her choice was worthwhile.

The exploration of the issue of choice as an element in the use of violence by women required the inclusion of the voices of younger women for whom our systems offer no protection from harassment and other forms of abuse. Melissa's story is illustrative. Melissa is a 14-year-old European American adolescent. She has large breasts and is not very heavy or tall. In the halls of her school during the frantic times of class changes she was repeatedly pushed against hallway lockers and groped by boys who did not know or care about her rights to her body. Melissa tried talking to a teacher and a counselor about the situation, but nothing was done. Recently, she started carrying a chain in her backpack. It is about 18 inches long with 2-inch links. Melissa told a community educator during a school presentation on the topic of dating violence, "They get it across the face if they try it."

Melissa, like many other children, was forced to problem-solve on her own because our society did not safeguard her from external violence and oppression. School personnel did not respond to her request for protection from the sexual violence she was experiencing. As a member of her generation, Melissa grew up at a time in which gender roles were evolving, not always in positive ways. The media (including children's cartoons and popular characters) now portray females in roles in which power and violence often go hand-in-hand. Girls who are aggressive are no longer seen as displaying male characteristics. Indeed, the use of violence often places girls in the position of role models. The effectiveness of violence as a deterrent to further abuse and victimization serves as a powerful reinforcer to young women whom society has failed to protect. Responding to violence with violence can appear a logical choice for adolescent girls in an environment in which nonviolent options are almost nonexistent and immediate negative consequences are not easily discerned.

The issue of consequences for women who use violence plays itself out in many spheres. Sandy's story is a case in point. Sandy is a 27-year-old European American woman who was court man-

dated to attend an anger management class. She had been married to David for 6 months, after a 3-year courtship. David had used physical abuse on two occasions before they were married, and each time he had promised that he would never do it again. Sandy was afraid of David's strength and she agreed to marry him with the condition that he would never use violence against her in the future. Six months into their marriage, David slapped Sandy when she refused to tell him with whom she was talking on the phone, breaking her glasses and causing various cuts and bruises on her face. Sandy immediately called 911 and when the police arrived and David began to rationalize his violence, Sandy began hitting him with her fists in front of the officer. Both were arrested. Sandy told the facilitator of the group she was attending that she hit David when the police officer was at the scene because she could; she knew the police officer would not let David hit her anymore. Sandy obviously seized the opportunity that the presence of the officer created to retaliate in a violent manner. She chose to use violence at a time when she felt herself protected by the police officer rather than as an immediate response to David's slap while they were alone. Her choice was at least partially the result of her fear of David's strength. Although it may have kept her from further physical harm, the consequences for Sandy of her violent act in front of the police were still significant.

The cost inherent in the use of violence by women includes both psychological and legal consequences as well as the potential for further harm if the violence escalates. It appears that the analysis of the element of choice in this model requires a concurrent exploration into the issue of consequences for women who choose to use violence.

SUMMARY

The voices of victims and aggressors have given our workgroup a great deal of material for our exploration of the ways and contexts in which women make a choice to use violence. Thus far, we have found that the stories they have shared with us lend support to the model proposed by Zemsky (1990) and Gilbert et al. (1990). The stories that we used for this article were chosen to illustrate each of the three components of the model. We are aware, however, that, as in real life, the elements are inextricably

intertwined in many of the stories. The women's accounts contain examples of (a) the ways in which they learned the effectiveness of violence as a control mechanism as they saw violence being enacted in their lives, (b) opportunities that presented themselves as a result of the imbalance of power in relationships, and (c) their choices to use or not use violence, along with the consequences. Many women are not aware of the dynamics that have led to their use of violence. In our privileged position as women with formal education and the means to explore these issues in depth, we have had the opportunity to use their stories to begin to develop a more thorough understanding of the contexts in which women use violence.

As stated at the beginning of this article, in this (our initial) foray into the use of violence by women, we wanted to include many instances of what bell hooks (2000) called "patriarchal violence in the home" rather than limit our analysis to the topic of battering. We believe that this decision was a valid one, given the paucity of existing literature on the subject and the almost total exclusion of same-gender intimate partner violence and child abuse in the discourse regarding the use of violence by women.

We want to again emphasize the exploratory character of our ideas and the informal and anecdotal nature of our data gathering. We believe, nevertheless, that the work presented here is a necessary first step in bringing together academic theories and women's life experiences to elucidate and enhance what is known regarding the ways and contexts in which women use violence.

We are aware of the potential for this article to be used in ways that could be detrimental to the gains made in the field of domestic violence prevention and intervention thus far. The issue of the use of violence by women, as we mentioned at the beginning, is a sensitive topic that must be explored with care and integrity. Without any exceptions, the voices that we presented here were those of people who were extremely distraught by the experience of violence, either as victims or perpetrators. The studies that simply compare the number of times women and men have used violence run the risk of reducing this painful human experience to mere statistics. A contextual analysis is essential to understand sufficiently the dynamics and consequences of the violent acts themselves. Before we can focus our analyses on specific types of violence by women, however, it is important to understand the

elements that may be at work in all types of patriarchal violence. The model presented here offers an exciting potential for continuing this exploration.

In our initial exploration of the use of violence by women, the three-element model provided the opportunity to begin to obtain a deeper understanding of the ways in which violence is used, regardless of gender, culture, or sexual orientation. Our readings and dialogues during the preparation of this article helped us to recognize that women do indeed choose to use violence at different times and for different reasons. We were reminded also of the need to maintain gender, as well as the context of how and why violence is used, at the center of our exploration and analysis while bringing in additional elements that will help us gain a more thorough understanding of this complex and serious social problem.

As we present our thoughts and ideas guided by the voices of the women with whom we work, we invite researchers and community members to continue this exploration in ways that are at once systematic and respectful. The voices of women must remain central to the process, which must also include a more thorough understanding of the mechanisms that battered women employ as nonviolent resistance to their plight. The resilience and survival strategies of women can provide important information for interventions and policy making that create transformative and nonviolent models for all members of our society.

NOTES

1. All the names in the stories and specific details that could identify the women have been changed to assure confidentiality.

2. One of the authors (Kim Frndak) coined the term "women who partner with women" as an attempt to address the concern that some women (especially some women of color) do not like the word "lesbian" to refer to themselves as the term could be a barrier to their use of available resources in the community.

3. We decided to use the more inclusive term "same-gender" instead of "same-sex" in this article so that this exploration of the use of violence in relationships could include persons who do not fit neatly into the dichotomous male/female sex classification (e.g., transgendered people).

4. We have found it helpful to refer to the person who most often uses oppressive and control tactics within a relationship as the "predominant aggressor." The usefulness of this term became apparent as we discussed the use of violence in the same-gender couples with

whom we work. In the majority of cases, both women reported using oppressive control tactics at some point in their relationship.

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