

# Violence Against Women

## *An Integrated, Ecological Framework*

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*This article encourages the widespread adoption of an integrated, ecological framework for understanding the origins of gender-based violence. An ecological approach to abuse conceptualizes violence as a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in an interplay among personal, situational, and sociocultural factors. Although drawing on the conceptual advances of earlier theorists, this article goes beyond their work in three significant ways. First, it uses the ecological framework as a heuristic tool to organize the existing research base into an intelligible whole. Whereas other theorists present the framework as a way to think about violence, few have attempted to establish what factors emerge as predictive of abuse at each level of the social ecology. Second, this article integrates results from international and cross-cultural research together with findings from North American social science. And finally, the framework draws from findings related to all types of physical and sexual abuse of women to encourage a more integrated approach to theory building regarding gender-based abuse.*

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*Despite more than 20 years of activism against violence against women, little consensus has yet been reached on the etiology of gender-based abuse. The task of theory building has been severely hampered by the narrowness of traditional academic disciplines and by the tendency of both academics and activists to advance single-factor theories rather than explanations that reflect the full complexity and messiness of real life.*

*To date, theories of violence have been strongly influenced by either the disciplinary biases of psychology, sociology, and criminology or the ideological and political agendas of feminist activists. Theorists have either tended to emphasize individual explanations for violence (men beat women because of psychopathology or poor impulse control) or they propose social/political explanations (battering results from gender-power inequities and*

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the historical construction of the patriarchal family). Only recently have theorists begun to concede that a complete understanding of gender abuse may require acknowledging factors operating on multiple levels (Crowell & Burgess, 1996; S. Miller, 1994).

The feminist community has been especially reluctant to acknowledge factors other than patriarchy in the etiology of abuse. This reluctance, however, must be seen in the context of a discourse on violence that has traditionally been very slow to acknowledge the significance of gender inequalities and power differentials in the etiology of violence directed toward women. For years, academic social science failed to acknowledge even the presence of the problem, much less to incorporate issues of power, gender, and rights into its reigning analysis. As a result, feminist researchers and activists have been understandably reluctant to endorse any theory that is not grounded in a thorough understanding of the way that male privilege operates to perpetuate gender-based abuse. They rightly point out that although theories based on stress, social learning, personality disorders, or alcohol abuse may suggest why individual men become violent, they do not explain why women are so persistently the target (Schechter, 1982).

At the same time, the feminist emphasis on male dominance and gender hierarchy (to the exclusion of other social and individual factors) fails to explain why some men beat and rape women when others do not, even though all men are exposed to cultural messages that posit male superiority and grant men as a class the right to control female behavior. Any analysis of violence must recognize the primacy of culturally constructed messages about the proper roles and behavior of men and women and the power disadvantage women bring to relationships by virtue of their lack of access to resources. Male dominance is the foundation for any realistic theory of violence, but experience suggests that as a single factor explanation, it is inadequate. Theory must be able to account for both why individual men become violent and why women as a class are so often their target.

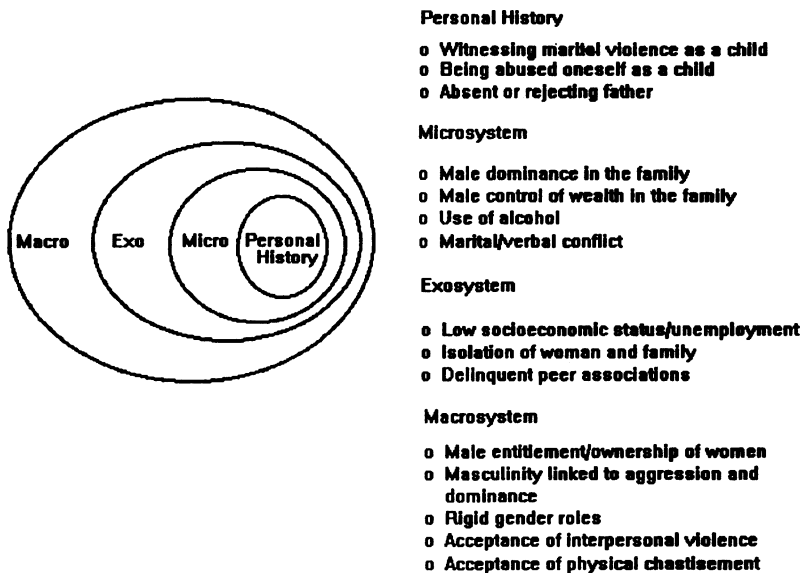
In this spirit, I would like to propose the more widespread adoption of an ecological framework for conceptualizing the etiology of gender-based violence. An ecological approach to abuse conceptualizes violence as a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in an interplay among personal, situational, and sociocultural

factors. This multidimensional approach was first advanced to help organize the various research findings on the etiology of child abuse and neglect (Belsky, 1980). Later, it was applied to battering by a variety of theorists, including Carlson (1984), Dutton (1988), Edleson and Tolman (1992), and Corsi (1994). Although first applied to domestic violence more than a decade ago, the ecological framework of abuse has not widely filtered into the activist or research community, despite its potential to accommodate feminist and social science insights about violence.

As applied to abuse, ecological frameworks have been conceptualized in a variety of ways, although all share the notion of embedded levels of causality. For the purposes of this article, I have adopted the descriptive nomenclature used by Belsky in his 1980 article on the etiology of child abuse and neglect. Belsky's framework consists of four levels of analysis, best visualized as four concentric circles (see Figure 1). The innermost circle represents the personal history factors that each individual brings to his or her behavior and relationships. The next circle, the microsystem, represents the immediate context in which abuse takes place—frequently the family or other intimate or acquaintance relationship. The third level, the exosystem, encompasses the institutions and social structures, both formal and informal, that embed the microsystem—the world of work, neighborhood, social networks, and identity groups. And finally, the macrosystem represents the general views and attitudes that permeate the culture at large.

In addition, several theorists (see Edleson & Tolman, 1992) emphasize the importance of the mesosystem, an additional layer that represents the interplay between various aspects of a person's social environment. The mesosystem includes linkages between an individual's family and other ambits of involvement, such as place of work, extended family, or network of peers. The mesosystem also includes linkages with social institutions, such as the police, courts, and social services.

This article uses an ecological framework to help rationalize and integrate findings from the many different disciplines that have theorized the possible causes of gender-based abuse. It is based on a review of North American academic research on violence from the perspectives of anthropology, psychology, and sociology and from cross-cultural comparative studies that use



**Figure 1:** Factors related to violence against women at different levels of the social ecology

statistical methods to analyze coded ethnographic studies.<sup>1</sup> The resulting framework (see Figure 1) includes only those factors shown empirically to be related to differential rates of violence against women and girls. Neither the framework nor the figure, however, should be interpreted as definitive because they are based on a tentative and incomplete research base. Critical factors may be missing simply because the research has not been done to test their significance. Others may prove to be correlates rather than true causal factors in abuse.

Although drawing on the conceptual advances of earlier theorists, this article goes beyond their work in three significant ways. First, it uses the framework as a heuristic tool for organizing the existing research base into an intelligible whole. Most other theorists present the framework as a way to think about violence but do not use it as a tool for synthesizing existing knowledge. The article is strengthened by the convergence of findings across a wide variety of settings, using a range of research methods. Second, the article draws on findings from international and cross-cultural research in addition to data from North American social



science. And finally, the framework integrates findings related to all types of physical and sexual abuse of women to encourage a more integrated approach to theory building regarding gender-based abuse. Recent multivariate frameworks suggest that one or more factors may underlie both sexual and nonsexual aggression against women (Hall, 1990; Malamuth, 1988; Malamuth, Linz, Heavey, Barnes, & Acker, 1995). In the words of Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, and Tanaka (1991), "It is likely to be fruitful to study sexual and nonsexual aggression against women within the same framework, rather than in largely unrelated lines of research as has been the pattern to date" (p. 680).

As will become clear, considerable room exists for interpretation as to exactly where a particular factor most appropriately fits into the framework (e.g., Should delinquent peer associations be considered a microsystem or an exosystem factor?). More important than the location of any single factor is the dynamic interplay between factors operating at multiple levels. A nested ecological framework explicitly emphasizes the interaction of these factors in the etiology of abuse.

## INDIVIDUAL/ONTOGENIC FACTORS

Ontogenic factors refer to those features of an individual's developmental experience or personality that shape his or her response to microsystem and exosystem stressors. Most existing leads on ontogenetic factors related to violence have emerged from case control studies that have sought to identify risk factors that can reliably distinguish victims or perpetrators of violence from matched controls. Several reviews have attempted to make sense of the North American literature by using meta-analysis to identify markers that consistently predict either victimization and/or perpetration of abuse (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Sedlak, 1988).<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, very few factors have emerged that reliably predict women at risk of intimate assault. Hotaling and Sugarman (1986) found that of 42 risk markers studied in female victims, only one—having witnessed violence between parents or caregivers in childhood—was consistently correlated with being the victim of a male partner's violence. Alcohol use, income, education level,

hostility, self-esteem, being a full-time housewife, and use of violence toward children were not found to be consistently related to victimization of women.

For husbands who are violent toward their female partners, only two developmental experiences have emerged as particularly predictive of future abuse: witnessing domestic violence as a child and experiencing physical or sexual abuse as a child. A third factor, having an absent or rejecting father, emerges as a possible, although less clear, predictor of future violent behavior, as we will see next.

### **WITNESSING MARITAL VIOLENCE AS A CHILD**

According to Hotaling and Sugarman (1986), 94% of empirical studies reviewed found a significant relationship for men between witnessing violence against their mother and later abusing a partner themselves. This implies that violence in adult relationships is in part a learned response of young boys who grow up in a violent home. Exposure to family violence, however, is not a prerequisite for future abuse. Caesar (1988) found that 38% of her sample of wife abusers had neither witnessed nor experienced physical aggression as a child. The link between witnessing abuse as a child and future risk of abusing has been replicated in population-based studies of wife abuse in Nicaragua (Ellsberg, Peña, Herrera, Liljestrand, & Winkvist, 1996), Cambodia (Johnson, 1996), Chile (Larain, 1993), and Canada (Nelson & Zimmerman, 1996).

### **BEING ABUSED DURING CHILDHOOD**

Being abused as a child is also a risk marker for later relationship abuse, although the effect appears to be less strong than that of witnessing parental violence. Experience of violence was correlated with partner abuse by men in 69% of the studies Hotaling and Sugarman (1986) reviewed. National probability samples also reveal that children who both witness violence and who are abused themselves are at particular risk of becoming assaultive against women in adulthood (Kalmuss & Straus, 1984; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that not all boys who are abused grow up to be abusive

themselves, nor do all abusers have a history of sexual or physical abuse.

In a number of longitudinal studies, sexual victimization in childhood likewise emerges as a significant risk factor for future sexual aggression against women (Friedrich, Beilke, & Urquiza, 1988). A recent review of prospective studies on sexually abused boys indicates that 1 in 5 go on to molest children sexually (Watkins & Bentovim, 1992). Other prospective studies have demonstrated a link between physical abuse in childhood and a greater risk of exhibiting chronic aggressive behavior in childhood (Dodge, Bates, & Petit, 1990), delinquency in adolescence, and violent criminal offending in adulthood (Widom, 1989), after controlling for a variety of other family constellation, socioeconomic, and biological factors.

The exact mechanisms that translate witnessing or experiencing violence in childhood into violent and abusive behavior in adulthood is as yet unclear. Social learning theory suggests that frameworking of adult behavior and learning the instrumentality of violence as a means to get your way are part of the puzzle (O'Leary, 1988). It is also likely that early victimization leaves emotional and developmental scars that can damage a young child's developing sense of self. Research by Dutton (1995), for example, suggests that early experiences in the family of origin influence not only behavior (through a modeling process), but also a child's developing personality. Research shows that many of the personality features that are characteristic of at least one subtype of batterer are highly reminiscent of personality disturbances that derive from trauma: exaggerated separation anxiety, problems with regulating emotion, an intense dependency on primary interpersonal relationships, and an inability to tolerate being alone. Dutton hypothesizes that in addition to teaching violence, abusive homes can lead to psychological disturbances that, in combination with other micro-, exo-, and macrolevel influences, can lead to violence and aggression in later life.

A wide range of studies have also linked hostility, especially hostility toward women, to physical and sexual aggression toward women (Koss & Dinero, 1989; Leonard & Blane, 1992; Malamuth et al., 1995; McKenry, Julian, & Gavazzi, 1995). The life experiences that most consistently lead to developing hostile attitudes toward women are as yet unclear.

## ABSENT OR REJECTING FATHER

Several lines of research suggest that boys who grow up without a consistent and available father or father figure are more prone to violent behavior in adulthood. In her comparative study of child-rearing practices and personality, for example, anthropologist Beatrice Whiting (Whiting & Edwards, 1965) found that men were most loosely connected with the family and had least to do with child rearing in the cultures with the most violent men. Draper and Harpending (1982, 1987) hypothesize that this may be caused in part by the fact that in father-absent cultures, boys are reared by peers from an early age, a reality that is likely to promote intense aggressive competition, dominance relationships, and antagonism toward women. Other research in support of this thesis can be found in Bacon, Child, and Barry, 1963; Herzog and Mali, 1980; Miedzian, 1991 (but see Ember & Ember, 1995). It is impossible to tell without further testing whether lack of paternal involvement is a causal factor in violence or merely an intervening variable.

Some research also links rejecting and emotionally abusive fathers to the development of abusive behavior later in life. In his sample of assaultive men seeking treatment, Dutton (1995) found that paternal rejection was the strongest contributor to a type of personality dysfunction (known as borderline personality organization) characteristic of at least one subtype of batterers. As Dutton observes, "Cold, rejecting, and abusive fathers may do more than model abusive behaviors; they may contribute to the formation of a personality pattern that is associated with adult abusiveness, anger, depression, and mood cycles" (p. 142).

## MICROSYSTEM (SITUATIONAL) FACTORS

The microsystem refers to those interactions in which a person directly engages with others as well as to the subjective meanings assigned to those interactions. For the violent man and his partner, the most salient microcosm is the family, generally the site and context for most abusive episodes. In the case of date rape, child molestations, or other forms of violence that take place outside of the home, the microsystem is best conceptualized as the immediate context of the abuse.

A variety of microsystem factors have been shown to be related to the increased risk of sexual coercion, childhood sexual abuse, and/or physical abuse of adult women. Perhaps the most important have to do with the structure of the traditional family.

### MALE DOMINANCE IN THE FAMILY

The cross-cultural study by Levinson (1989) found that male economic and decision-making authority in the family was one of the strongest predictors of societies that demonstrate high violence against women. Data from U.S. sociological research on wife abuse conform to this analysis. The 1975 National Family Violence Survey, for example, found that wife abuse occurred in about 11% of couples with a clearly dominant husband as compared to only about 3% of couples where the woman had approximately equal influence in decision making (Straus et al., 1980). Frieze and McHugh (cited in Frieze & Browne, 1989) likewise found that decision making in the family was highly related to a husband's level of violence. The most violent husbands tended to make most of the decisions regarding family finances and strictly controlled when and where their wives could go. Other research supporting a link between domestic authority and wife beating can be found in Bowker (1983).

A study by Yllo and Straus (1990) suggests that the relationship between patriarchal family structure and violence may in part be fueled by macrolevel norms that approve of male dominance in the family. In a study comparing marital violence rates in 30 U.S. states, Yllo and Straus found a linear relationship between patriarchal norms and violence against wives. In fact, the rate of wife beating in states with the most male-dominant norms (6.2%, measured by the degree that residents believed that husbands should dominate family decision making) was double that in states with more egalitarian norms (3.1%).

There is also considerable evidence that men raised in patriarchal families (those that encourage traditional gender roles) are more likely to become violent adults, to rape women acquaintances, and to batter their intimate partners than are men raised in more egalitarian homes (Fagot, Loerber, & Reid, 1988; Friedrich

et al., 1988; Gwartney-Gibbs, Stockard, & Bohmer, 1987; Koss & Dinero, 1989; Malamuth et al., 1991, 1995; Riggs & O'Leary, 1989).

### **MALE CONTROL OF WEALTH IN THE FAMILY**

The Levinson (1989) study also found that wife beating is most frequent in societies in which men control the wealth, especially the fruits of family labor. In fact, of all the variables tested, the three strongest predictors were male dominance in the family, male control of family wealth, and divorce restrictions placed on women. Based on further statistical analysis, Levinson concluded that the influence of male economic control on wife beating is mediated through male domestic authority and restrictions on women's access to divorce.

Kalmuss and Straus (1984) report similar findings in the United States. According to national data, a wife's economic dependence on her husband—reflected in the wife being unemployed outside of the home, the presence of children under age 5, and the husband earning 75% of family income—is a major predictor of severe wife beating. Likewise, Frieze (1983) found that victims of marital rape tended to be more economically dependent on their husbands than were women who had not experienced marital rape.

### **MARITAL CONFLICT**

Not surprisingly, marital conflict emerges repeatedly in the literature as highly predictive of wife assault, even after controlling for other variables (Coleman & Straus, 1986; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1990; Stets, 1990). In their national survey, for example, Straus et al. (1980) found that frequency of verbal disagreements was strongly related to the likelihood of physical aggression, with extremely high-conflict couples having a rate of violence 16 times greater than couples with the fewest arguments. Hoffman, Demo, and Edwards (1994) replicated these findings in a population-based sample of married men in Bangkok, Thailand. In a multiple logistic regression, verbal marital conflict remained significantly related to physical wife assault, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, husband's

stress, and other family process variables (e.g., marital companionship and marital instability).

Hotaling and Sugarman (1990) report that conflicts in violent marriages often involve disagreements over the division of labor, frequent drinking by the husband, and/or the wife's having a higher educational attainment than the husband. Data from Coleman and Straus (1986) suggest that marital conflict interacts with the power structure of the family. When conflict occurs in an asymmetrical power structure, a much higher risk of violence exists than when conflict occurs in an egalitarian relationship. A wide variety of qualitative studies likewise identify sexual jealousy as a common source of marital conflict and accusations of infidelity as a common precipitator to abuse (Browne 1987; Wilson & Daly, 1995).

## USE OF ALCOHOL

Many studies have found an association between heavy alcohol consumption and sexual and physical violence against women (for a review, see Kantor, 1993; Kantor & Straus, 1989; Leonard, 1993). There is also evidence that alcohol plays a disinhibiting role in some types of sexual abuse. Many researchers believe that alcohol operates as a situational factor, increasing the likelihood of violence by reducing inhibitions, clouding judgment, and impairing an individual's ability to interpret cues (see Abbey, Ross, & McDuffie, 1995).

In a study that controlled for possible confounding factors, Leonard, Bromet, Parkinson, Day, and Ryan (1985) found that wife abuse was strongly related to a current diagnosis of alcohol dependence or abuse, even after controlling for marital satisfaction, hostility, and a variety of sociodemographic factors. Another multivariate analysis found that when men reported no other drug problem, alcohol problems increased a man's level of violence toward his partner. However, alcohol problems did not increase the level of violence when the man had other drug problems. The researchers hypothesize that in some cases, drug use may ameliorate the violence that is associated with alcohol problems (B. Miller, 1990).

What remains unclear, however, is how alcohol operates to increase the risk of violence. Some laboratory evidence suggests



that alcohol consumption can lead to increases in aggressive behavior under certain limited circumstances (for a review, see Leonard & Jacob, 1989). Excessive alcohol use may also increase family violence by providing a ready topic for arguments among couples. Other researchers have posited that alcohol works by providing an excuse or cultural time-out for antisocial behavior. Thus, men are more likely to act violently because they do not feel that they will be held accountable for their behavior if they are drunk (Gelles, 1974; MacAndrew & Edgerton, 1969). Men in treatment groups often invoke alcohol use to disavow responsibility for their aggressiveness.

The fear that batterers and their apologists will use alcohol abuse to excuse violent behavior by violent men has made many feminist activists wary of acknowledging any role for alcohol in the etiology of abuse. They rightly point out that many alcoholic men do not beat their wives and not all men who beat their wives abuse alcohol. Some evidence exists, however, that abusive men with alcohol problems tend to be violent more frequently and inflict more serious injuries on their partners than do men without alcohol problems (Frieze & Browne, 1989). Thus, treating an underlying alcohol problem can potentially help reduce the incidence and severity of assaults, but it seldom ends the violence.

## EXOSYSTEM FACTORS

The exosystem refers to the "social structures both formal and informal that impinge on the immediate settings in which a person is found and thereby influence, delimit or determine what goes on there" (Belsky, 1980, p. 321). A significant observation about exosystem influences is that they are often the byproducts of changes taking place in the larger social milieu (e.g., social isolation stemming from increased migration in the population). The following exosystem factors have been linked, in the literature, to violence against women.

### UNEMPLOYMENT/LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Although violence against women occurs in all socioeconomic classes, there is strong evidence that wife abuse is more common

in families with low incomes and unemployed men. In 9 of 11 case-comparison studies, family income was found to be a consistent risk factor of wife assault (Hotelling & Sugarman, 1986). The evidence is even stronger in general population surveys. In the National Family Violence Survey, for example, families living at or below the poverty line had a rate of violence between husbands and wives that was more than five times greater than the rate of wife abuse in the most well-to-do families (Straus et al., 1980). This relationship has also been found to hold true in population-based surveys in Cambodia (Nelson & Zimmerman, 1996); Leon, Nicaragua (Ellsberg et al., 1996); Lima, Peru (Gonzales de Olarte & Gavilano Llosa, 1997); Santiago, Chile (Larrain, 1993); and in Bangkok, Thailand. In a representative sample of married Thai men, for example, socioeconomic status was significantly and inversely related to the occurrence of wife abuse, after controlling for status inconsistency, number of children, and years of marriage (Hoffman et al., 1994).

Unemployment among men has likewise been linked to woman battering (Stark et al., 1981; Straus et al., 1980), although without controlling for the influence of race, income, education, and contact time between partners, it is impossible to tell whether being without a job in itself increases risk. In a multilevel model of partner violence in inner-city Baltimore, however, several neighborhood level factors, including the rate of unemployment, emerged as predictive of partner violence. The odds ratio was 3:4 for neighborhoods with an unemployment rate of 12% relative to neighborhoods with an unemployment rate of 6% (O'Campo et al., 1995). Likewise, anecdotal evidence from around the world suggests that violence against women increases as the economic situation of the family deteriorates. Several descriptive studies have linked structural adjustment programs and the economic havoc they create to increasing levels of abuse in the home (UNICEF, 1989).

Again, it is not clear exactly how low socioeconomic status operates to increase the risk of abuse. It may not be the lack of income, but rather some other variable that accompanies the experience of living in poverty, such as crowding or hopelessness, that is significant. Poverty, for example, is likely to generate stress, frustration, and a sense of inadequacy in some men for failing to

live up to their culturally defined role of provider. It may also operate by providing ready fodder for marital disagreements and/or by making it more difficult for women to leave violent or otherwise unsatisfactory relationships. Evidence from the Thai study suggests that economic deprivation does not operate solely (or even primarily) through increasing men's stress or by exacerbating status inconsistencies between partners. Multivariate modeling in the Thai study showed that increases in socioeconomic status decrease the likelihood of physical wife abuse, even when controlling for the husband's stress, the level of status inconsistency between spouses (based on income, education, and occupational prestige), the number of children, and the duration of the marriage. Additional analysis suggests that the impact of economic deprivation on wife abuse is partially mediated through increasing marital conflict.

### ISOLATION OF THE WOMAN AND THE FAMILY

Clinical and quantitative data suggest that social isolation is both a cause and a consequence of wife abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gelles, 1974). Nielsen, Russell, and Ellington (1992), for example, used regression analysis to show that battered women are more isolated in terms of frequency of interaction with friends/neighbors, frequency of interaction with relatives, and family participation in public activities. Further analysis revealed that isolation of the woman and her family preceded battering, although isolation tended to increase as a relationship became more violent.

These empirical studies from the United States are consistent with findings from the cross-cultural case studies compiled in Counts, Brown, and Campbell (1992) that link violence against women with the social isolation of families. One of the strongest predictors of societies with low levels of violence is whether family and community members would intervene if a woman were being beaten or harassed. In low-violence societies, the family and community feels it is their right and obligation to intervene in private family matters, whereas in the cultures with high violence against women, families are isolated and husband and wife relations are considered outside of public scrutiny.

The potentially mediating effect of strong family and friendship ties on rates of wife assault has been shown to hold true empirically in studies of wife abuse among African American families. In analyzing data from the National Family Violence Survey, Cazenave and Straus (1979) found that women who had strong family and friendship networks experienced lower rates of violence. The length of time that a couple lived in a neighborhood and the presence of extended family members in the home were associated with substantially lower levels of wife assault in this sample.

### DELINQUENT PEER ASSOCIATIONS

Peer group behaviors and attitudes seem to play an important role in encouraging sexual aggression, especially among adolescent males (Alder, 1985; DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993; Frank, 1989 as cited in Malamuth et al., 1991). In a study by Gwartney-Gibbs et al. (1987), almost twice as many males with sexually aggressive peers reported coercive or forced intercourse than did males with no sexually aggressive peers. Petty and Dawson (1989) likewise report that sexual aggression is significantly related to desires to be held in high esteem by acquaintances, "a characteristic that may play an important part in maintaining sexual aggression by men through peer pressure" (p. 360).

In Kanin's (1985) study of 158 men who admitted to having forced a woman to have intercourse during a date, peer-group influences were said to provide "a culture where sexual access is of paramount importance in the maintenance of self-esteem" (p. 224). Friends of sexually aggressive men were reported as providing much more pressure for sexual activity and as being more likely to condone sexual aggression in certain circumstances than were friends of control subjects. Of the self-reported rapists, 41% had engaged in group male intercourse with a female and 67% had had intercourse with a female recommended as sexually congenial (i.e., open to sex), as compared to 7% and 13% of their controls, respectively.

The salience of delinquent peer associations also appears in the work of Malamuth et al. (1991), who used structural equation modeling on a national sample of U.S. college students to test a model of sexual aggression against women. Malamuth's team

found that delinquent peer associations were causally related to overall coerciveness toward women. DeKeseredy and Kelly (1993) also found that male peer support, defined as attachment to male peers who encourage and legitimate woman abuse, is a statistically significant predictor of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse by men in college dating relationships. In a multiple regression analysis, respondents' patriarchal beliefs and attitudes, together with three male peer-support measures (attachment to abusive peers, peers' patriarchal attitudes, and peer pressure toward abuse) explained approximately 21% of the variance in the three types of woman abuse.

### **MACROSYSTEM FACTORS**

The macrosystem refers to the broad set of cultural values and beliefs that permeate and inform the other three layers of the social ecology. Macrosystem factors operate through their influence on factors and structures lower down in the system. For example, male supremacy, as a macrolevel factor, would likely influence the organization of power in community institutions as well as the distribution of decision-making authority in intimate relationships.

Most feminist discourse and theorizing on violence against women have focused on macrosystem factors such as patriarchy. A nested ecological approach acknowledges the centrality and importance of macrolevel factors like male domination, but emphasizes the interrelationship of patriarchal beliefs and values with other factors elsewhere in the framework. Indeed, much evidence from the cross-cultural literature substantiates many of the major tenets of feminist theory on male violence.

### **NOTION OF MASCULINITY LINKED TO DOMINANCE, TOUGHNESS, AND HONOR**

According to the cross-cultural literature, one of the most enduring macrosystem factors that promotes violence toward women is a cultural definition of manhood that is linked to dominance, toughness, or male honor (Counts et al., 1992; Sanday, 1981). According to anthropologist David Gilmore (1990), not all

cultures define manhood in terms of dominance and aggression; some focus on being a good father and provider or have no strong notions of manhood at all. Research suggests, however, that where masculinity is linked to dominance and male honor, rape and sexual coercion are more common (Sanday, 1981).

Indeed, the dominant style of men in Sanday's (1981) rape-prone societies sound remarkably similar to what U.S. psychologists Mosher and Sirkin (1984) have labeled the "macho personality constellation" or hypermasculinity. Hypermasculine men have calloused sexual attitudes toward women; they see violence as manly and desirable and they view danger as exciting. In fact, Reiss (1986) has found that in societies with a high incidence of rape, the macho personality is more likely to be endorsed as the appropriate one for males.

According to Mosher and Tomkins (1988), the socialization of the hypermasculine man results in an overvaluing of a definition of masculinity as being tough, unfeeling, and violent. The consequent personality development produces a need to risk danger for excitement, lack of empathy, and proclivities toward sexually coercive conduct. Sexual aggression, because it contains attributes associated with masculinity—strength, power, forcefulness, domination, and toughness—is regarded by these men as an activity that validates their masculinity.

The constellation of attitudes and beliefs known as hypermasculinity has also been linked to rape at the individual level. Males who score high on the hypermasculinity scale report a history of sexual coercion and force in dating situations (Cole, 1988; Mahoney, Shively, & Traw, 1986; Mosher, Sirkin, & Anderson, 1986). The Hypermasculinity Index (HI) consists of three interrelated components: calloused sex attitudes, danger as exciting, and violence as manly. Weir and Branscombe (cited in Gold, Fultz, Burke, Grisco, & Willett, 1992) also found that of the 24 variables they tested, the Callous Sex Attitudes and Violence as Manly subscales of the HI were among the most powerful in discriminating between men who have been sexually aggressive and those who have not.

Some researchers posit that macho socialization works to increase violence by amplifying anger and decreasing empathy in response to distress or threat. Mosher and Tomkins (1988) suggest that the hypermasculine man responds to situations that distress



or threaten as a cue to enact the rules of the macho script. In terms of affect, this means magnifying the emotion considered stereotypically male, such as anger, and inhibiting emotions considered unmanly, such as empathy or compassion. Data from Gold et al. (1992) support this interpretation, demonstrating that men who score high on the HI respond to video depictions of a crying baby with more anger and less empathy than do their less macho peers.

## RIGID GENDER ROLES

Several lines of research suggest that adherence to rigid gender roles—either at the societal or the individual level—increases the likelihood of violence against women. In a sample of 17 cultures, for example, McConahay and McConahay (1977) found that gender-role rigidity was highly correlated with interpersonal violence. Ethnographic descriptions of societies that have little or no violence against women are striking in their lack of strongly defined gender roles.

Research at the individual level reinforces this conclusion. In large-scale studies of U.S. college students, men who adhere to traditional gender roles and have adversarial attitudes toward women have consistently been involved in sexually aggressive activity with women more than have men with more egalitarian attitudes (Koss, Leonard, Beezley, & Oros, 1985; Lisak & Roth, 1988; Malamuth, 1986; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984). Other evidence suggests that rigid, stereotyped views of gender roles also characterize men who sexually assault children (Overholser & Beck, 1986).

Stith and Farley (1994) found similar results when testing a causal framework of marital violence (the framework included marital stress, sex-role egalitarianism [SRE], level of alcoholism, self-esteem, and witnessing violence as a child.) Path analysis revealed that approval of marital violence and low SRE were the strongest predictors of severe wife abuse. (A low SRE score indicates traditional and rigid gender-role attitudes, whereas a high score indicates tolerance of males exhibiting traditionally female behaviors and females exhibiting traditionally male behaviors).

Whiting and Edwards's (1973) six-culture analysis further supports this hypothesis, finding that when traditional gender-based task assignments are changed and boys are required to perform



domestic tasks, gender differences in aggression are reduced, with the boys displaying less aggressive behavior. A similar reduction in gender difference is found when girls are freed from domestic chores and allowed to engage in more masculine activities.

### SENSE OF MALE ENTITLEMENT/ OWNERSHIP OVER WOMEN

A significant number of researchers have posited a link between violence against women and men's sense of ownership or entitlement over women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Schechter, 1982). Although this thesis has yet to be empirically tested, authors have assembled an impressive array of historical and qualitative data to support this hypothesis.

As far back as 1878, Francis Power Cobbe observed in his treatise, "Wife Torture in England," that "The notion that a man's wife is his *property* in the sense in which a horse is his property . . . is the fatal root of incalculable evil and misery" (Cobbe, quoted in Dobash & Dobash, 1979, pp. 1, 72).

Under English common law, "The wife came under the control of her husband and he had the legal right to use force against her in order to insure that she fulfilled her wifely obligations, which included the consummation of the marriage, cohabitation, maintenance of conjugal rights, sexual fidelity, and general obedience and respect for his wishes" (Dobash & Dobash, 1979, p. 60). The right of a husband to physically chastise his wife was upheld by the State Supreme Court of Mississippi in 1824 (*Bradley v. State*, cited in Pleck, 1989) and again by a court in North Carolina in 1868 (*State v. Rhodes*, cited in Pleck, 1989). It was not until 1871 that a court in Alabama (*Fulgham v. State*, cited in Crowell & Burgess, 1996) made that state the first to rescind a husband's right to beat his wife.

Other religious and historical traditions echo this presumption. When debating the value of a proposed wife-beating law in Papua, New Guinea, Minister William Wi of North Waghi argued, "Wife beating is an accepted custom. . . . We are wasting our time debating the issue." Another parliamentarian added, "I paid for my wife [through bridewealth], so she should not overrule my decisions, because I am the head of the family" (Heise, 1989, p. 5).

Similar views are enshrined in many religious texts. The *Skandapurana*, a sacred text of Hinduism, instructs that "a wife should take her meals after her husband . . . sleep after he sleeps. If he assaults her, she should not lose her temper. . . . She should never sit in an elevated place and never look angrily at her husband" (quoted in Marshall, 1995, p. 94). Likewise, the Bible admonishes women to obey their husbands, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church" (Ephesians 5:22-23).

### APPROVAL OF PHYSICAL CHASTISEMENT OF WOMEN

Most cultures approve of physical punishment of women and/or children under certain circumstances. Generally, such circumstances follow clearly defined cultural rules about who has a right to hit whom, under what circumstances, and to what degree. If the punishment is considered culturally acceptable, then the abuse is considered justified and others will not intervene. If it falls outside of the rules—either because it is someone who does not have the perceived right to chastise or the beating becomes too excessive—then the behavior becomes subject to public sanction. Frequently, it is this line that defines whether other parties (neighbors, family members, the police) will choose to intervene.

In the United States, for example, the dominant culture tolerates the spanking of children if they disobey their parents (Deley, 1988; Graziano, Lindquist, Kunice, & Munjal, 1992). There is a fairly clear, culturally recognized distinction between spanking and what is considered abuse. Many other cultures posit similar lines with respect to physical chastisement of women (Counts et al., 1992). Beatings for just cause are considered a man's right. Others will intervene only if the beating is interpreted as being without cause or as excessively brutal. Generally, any transgression of a gender norm, such as disobeying a husband, failing to prepare meals on time, or sexual infidelity, is considered just cause for abuse.

For example, in a recent population-based study of 6,926 men in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, a substantial proportion of men strongly approved of wife beating in situations where

women refused to obey their husbands or elders. Nearly two thirds of men strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that wives should always obey instructions given to them by their husbands. One fourth of men said that physical force should be used against wives if they disobey, a proportion that climbs to 50% in some districts of Uttar Pradesh. In this study, 30% of men admitted to having "physically hit, slapped, kicked or tried to hurt" their wives (Narayana, 1996). Rates of wife abuse across settings were strongly correlated with acceptance of physical chastisement.

### **CULTURAL ETHOS THAT CONDONES VIOLENCE AS A MEANS TO SETTLE INTERPERSONAL DISPUTES**

Both the Sanday (1981) cross-cultural study on rape and the Levinson (1989) cross-cultural study on family violence found that violence against women was much more likely in cultures that condoned the use of force as a way for adults to resolve conflict. Levinson found that wife beating was more strongly associated with men fighting to settle arguments than with more indirect measures of aggression, such as warfare ethos (i.e., glorification of war and warriors). In Sanday's (1981) study, rape was more strongly correlated with the degree of interpersonal violence than with any other factor. In short, where interpersonal violence is tolerated in the society at large, women are at greater risk.

Data from a national sample of 2,972 U.S. college men suggest that this relationship operates at an individual level as well. Acceptance of interpersonal violence was one of three factors that strongly discriminated sexually aggressive from nonaggressive males (Koss & Dinero, 1989). (The other factors were hostility toward women and early childhood exposure to violence.)

### **PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

An ecological framework of violence against women provides a way to understand much of the existing research with respect to gender-based abuse. The above framework is by no means definitive or complete, but it does provide an interesting heuristic tool for conceptualizing future research. Which of the above factors is

a necessary condition for violence? Which factors must appear together for violence to exist? Are factors from each level necessary for violence to occur? What factors are missing?

Mere visual inspection of the factors that have already emerged from the literature suggests some interesting questions to explore.

1. What portion of alcohol's impact on wife abuse is mediated through increased opportunities for marital conflict?
2. Is acceptance of physical chastisement of women an independent risk factor for wife abuse? What portion of variance in rates of violence between locations can be accounted for by this variable?
3. Does the use of alcohol during a dating encounter increase the likelihood of sexual aggression when controlling for degree of hostility toward women, exposure to violence in childhood, and delinquent peer associations?
4. Which factors have the greatest explanatory power when comparing rates of violence across different cultures?

Moreover, it should be possible to evaluate various renditions of this framework by testing which set of variables collectively accounts for the most variance between two matched sets of men—men known to beat their wives and men known to be nonviolent. Alternatively, a particular theory of violence could be tested by investigating representative samples of assaultive males with samples who are not assaultive but who share a variety of common characteristics with the former (e.g., same demographics, similar degree of marital conflict). As Dutton (1995) points out, by so doing, "the search for essential characteristics associated with assault could be more finely focused" (p. 52).

Significantly, the framework can be applied either at the level of the individual, to develop a profile of those men most at risk of abusing, or at the level of the community, to better understand why rates of abuse vary by setting. Table 1 represents an example of how the framework might be used to select variables for an exploratory study of potentially abusive men. Of particular importance to theory building, however, are studies conducted to determine which combinations of variables best explain rates of abuse across settings (see Table 2). Especially in non-Western countries, the data suggest that rates of physical and sexual abuse can vary widely, even in the same state or province. The better we understand the origins of these distinctions, the better able we will be to design intervention and prevention programs.

**TABLE 1**  
**Hypothetical Application of Ecological Framework to Individual-Level Analysis**

<i>Level of Analysis</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Question</i>
Macrosystem	Attitudes	Does man think that he has a right to chastise his wife? Does man adhere to rigid ideas regarding appropriate masculine and feminine roles?
	Beliefs	Does man believe the use of violence is acceptable? Does man believe that domination and aggressiveness equals manliness?
Exosystem	Isolation	Is man employed?
	Stress	Is his job stressful? Is the family poor?
Microsystem	Couple conflict	Does the couple argue over use of money, alcohol, etc.?
	Gender power dynamics	Does man hold exclusive economic and decision-making power in the family?
Ontogenic	Violent socialization	Did man experience or witness violence as a child?

**TABLE 2**  
**Hypothetical Application of Ecological Framework to Cross-Cultural Studies**

<i>Level of Analysis</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Question</i>
Macrosystem	Attitudes, norms	Is masculinity defined in terms of honor, dominance, or aggression? Does culture tolerate interpersonal violence? Does culture tolerate physical chastisement of women? Are women considered inferior or the property of men?
Exosystem	Alcohol use Poverty Isolation	Level of alcohol abuse in the community Level of economic stress and unemployment Level of exogamy: Do women leave their natal home to marry?
Microsystem	Male dominance Communication	Do men control the wealth in the family? Do men control decision-making in the family? Is communication between couples common?
Ontogenic	Level of physical abuse of children.	

Besides serving as a framework for research, an ecological approach to abuse has a number of other useful applications. For example, the framework provides a way to better understand

differences among abusers. A young college man with a basically healthy childhood might force his date to have sex against her will after a raucous fraternity party. This man would be responding mostly to macro- and exosystem factors: his sense of entitlement to sex, pressure from peers to prove his masculinity, alcohol-induced bravado, and cultural scripts about sexual encounters between men and women. After being caught and disciplined by his university and getting help for his alcohol problem, this man might desist from future violence. By contrast, a similar student who harbors deep hostilities toward women, is socially isolated, and experienced repeated rape as a child, may go on to rape multiple times, especially if he is never caught. The failure of others to intervene and this student's psychic wounds from sexual abuse contribute to and help shape his violent behavior.

Likewise, the framework helps visualize why a potentially abusive man might become violent in one moment in time and not another, or why one man might become violent in a certain situation, whereas another would not. Consider the case of a man who was abused as a child (ontogenic) and has a strong need to feel in control (ontogenic); who exists in a culture in which male-ness is defined by one's ability to respond aggressively to conflict (macrosystem), and where "good" women are supposed to be submissive (macrosystem). Suddenly, he loses his job (exosystem) and his wife, who has become more empowered after participating in a community group, decides to get a job; this leads to power struggles, conflict, and violence in the relationship (microsystem). It could be that this man would not have become violent if he had not lost his job and been threatened by his wife's growing autonomy. Alternatively, given sufficiently strong ontogenic and macrosystem factors, perhaps the man would have been violent even without additional exosystem stressors.

Acknowledging the influence of situational or personal history factors in the etiology of abuse in no way exculpates the perpetrator of the violence; we have never applied this type of logic to other crimes. Nor does it lessen the significance of macrolevel factors, such as notions of masculinity and male hegemony, in defining why women, especially intimate partners, are so consistently the targets. What a nested ecological approach to violence does, however, is to help activists and researchers grapple with the complexity of real life.

## NOTES

1. The cross-cultural studies include a study by Sanday (1981) that examines the presence and correlates of rape in 156 tribal societies, using anthropological data summarized by Murdock and White (1969) and a similar statistical analysis by Levinson (1989) of ethnographic data from 90 peasant and small-scale societies summarized in the Human Area Relations Files. Additionally, I have drawn on observations presented in *Sanctions and Sanctuary*, a collection of anthropological case studies examining wife abuse in 14 different cultural settings (Counts, Brown, & Campbell, 1992).

2. The analyses of Hotaling and Sugarman (1986) are based on findings from case-comparison investigations that were drawn from more than 400 empirical reports on husband-to-wife violence. To be classified as a consistent risk factor, the variable had to be measured in at least three independent investigations and found to be statistically related ( $p < .05$ ) in at least 70% of these investigations. Sedlak (1988) defined as a risk marker any variable that was related to wife assault in two thirds of relevant studies and gave preferential weight to findings from representative surveys.

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