

## **Pathways to Couple Violence – An Ecological Approach**

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### **Abstract**

Considerable studies have been done in the area of domestic/family violence, but few have addressed the multiple layers or causes of interpersonal violence (Carlson, 1984; Heise, 1998).

Existing provisions in Australia to help couples experiencing violence have in the past lent heavily on one stream of explanation (i.e., male perpetrator and female victim) coming from writers such as Walby (1992), Yllo and Bograd (1998) and Summers (1975). Although considerable understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon has developed more recently, these positions continue to influence policy and practice in the field, including in NSW (Evans 2002). The more recent approach from the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2002) sets out an ecological framework to help understand all violence, including interpersonal violence, as a contextualised phenomenon: the aim of this approach is never to condone any violence, but to understand better the different personal, social, economic and cultural contexts of the difficult reality.

We are involved in a study that would seek to use the broader perspective (WHO's ecological framework) and we feel that this broader view could be of interest to colleagues who are involved in this matter.

In line with the salutogenic approach adopted by the Men's Health Information & resource Centre in NSW (Macdonald, McDermott, Woods, Brown & Sliwka, 2000), it is hoped that the study will help us to better understand the complexities of the pathways to violence and the preferred support systems to help families overcome the violence in their relationships.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to share with colleagues, our investigations and intended use of the ecological model in understanding violence between couples, as used by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in its ‘World Report on Violence and Health’, published in 2002. It will:

- provide a description of the ecological model;
- discuss a pilot study into couple violence using the model;
- briefly talk about the current dominant model and what informs this model; and,
- demonstrate evidence of the need for a new perspective.

The application of this model is discussed in a pilot research study which will be undertaken by the Men’s Health Information and Resource Centre (MHIRC) at the University of Western Sydney, into the pathways to couple violence<sup>1</sup> in an area of social disadvantage in Western Sydney.

The ecological model provides a means of discovering and understanding the complexities involved in the pathways to couple violence. It is a tool that includes both the individual and sociological pathways to couple violence and encompasses a far wider and diverse environment than the linear-type model that is informed by feminist theory and used in the current NSW Policy for Identifying and Responding to Domestic Violence (NSW Department of Health, 2003)<sup>2</sup>.

It is our intention to stimulate interest to move forward in this research area and for this new approach to filter into the practical application of better services for families experiencing violence.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “couple violence” is used in this paper in preference to “domestic violence”. “Domestic violence” is a term that has different definitions and is often used interchangeably with “wife abuse” (Sarantakos, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> According to the NSW Policy for Identifying and Responding to Domestic Violence, the term “domestic violence” refers to “abuse and violence between adults who are partners or former partners” and that abusive and violent behaviour is most often “*by a man against a woman*”. Other forms of violence including: child abuse and neglect, child sexual abuse, parental abuse, date rape, adult sexual assault, elder abuse and Aboriginal family violence, are addressed in separate policies.

## 1) The Ecological Model

There are four different but interacting *nested* levels that make up the ecological model. Identified within each level are factors that make up the complexities of life. With the use of a framework (ecological model) that incorporates the complexities of life, we can gain a better and deeper understanding of what the pathways are towards violence between couples.

In 2002, the World Health Organisation published its “World Report on Violence and Health” which uses an ecological model to understand the multi-faceted nature of violence.

It uses an ecological framework to:

*“help understand all violence, including interpersonal violence, as a contextualised phenomenon: the aim of this approach is never to condone any violence, but to understand better the different personal, social, economic and cultural contexts of the difficult reality” (WHO, 2002).*

It embraces individual and social factors including male dominance, saying:

*“No single factor explains why one person and not another behaves in a violent manner. Violence is a complex problem rooted in the interaction of many factors – biological, social, cultural, economic and political,” (WHO, 2002).*

### a) History of the ecological model

In the 1970's, Urie Bronfenbrenner developed a framework to help look at the causal factors of domestic violence operating at different levels. He called it “an ecological model of human development”. Some years later, Jay Belsky revised this framework to incorporate the individual level (Carlson, 1984). Due to a “lack of a comprehensive understanding of the problem [of domestic violence]”, in 1984, Bonnie E. Carlson published an article on the ecological analysis of domestic violence. Retaining the essence of each of the labels, she relabelled the levels to include the individual, family, social-structural and socio-cultural, referring specifically in this instance to “domestic violence”.

Since then, the literature shows scant use of the ecological model to explore domestic violence. It has mainly been used in the area of child abuse and neglect. See, for example, “Etiology of child maltreatment: A developmental ecological analysis” (Belsky, 1993).

b) *The four levels of the WHO ecological model*

Below are the four levels of the ecological model, described by the WHO. Some of the variables that apply to each level are included under each level. The model is to be understood in the context of real life, where each level would invariably overlap and interact with each other. Therefore, the emphasis is on the *nested* nature of the model (see Figure 1 below).

- **Individual level**

- ❖ biological and personal factors;
- ❖ demographics (age, education, income);
- ❖ personality disorders, substance abuse;
- ❖ history of experiencing, witnessing or engaging in violent behaviour.

This comprises what each individual brings with her or him to the couple relationship, and also includes: attitudes, values, beliefs, skills, abilities, subjective perceptions (Carlson, 1984).

- **Relationship level**

- ❖ close relationships with family and friends (eg., marital conflict).

This includes the dynamics between family members and relationship patterns, the quality of the spousal relationship and connectedness to kin. It focuses on the nature of family life. This level often interacts with the previous individual level (Carlson, 1984).

- **Community level**

- ❖ schools, workplaces, neighbourhoods (local drug trade), absence of social networks, poverty.

The community level can refer to economic realities and trends (prosperity versus recession, high employment versus low employment); characteristics of community and neighbourhood, law enforcement and the criminal justice system (Carlson, 1984).

- **Societal level**

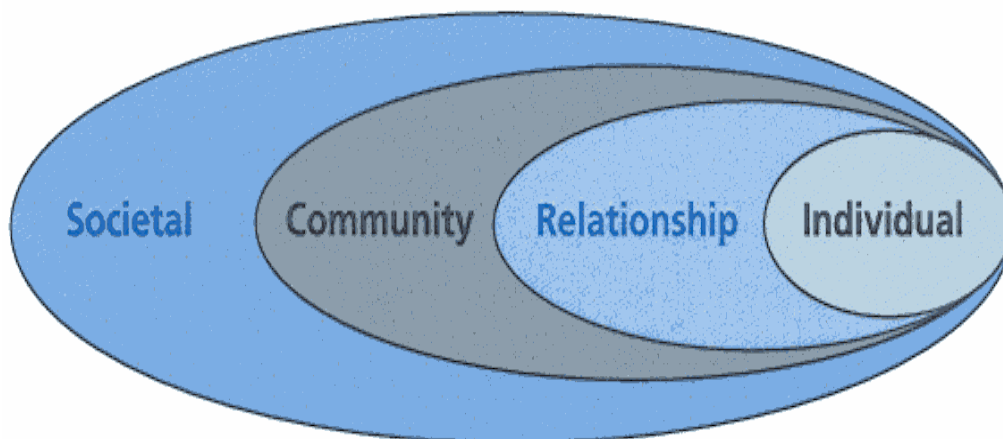
- ❖ broad social factors (responsiveness of the criminal justice system, social and cultural norms regarding gender roles or

parent-child relationships, income inequality, social welfare system, social acceptability of violence, availability of firearms, exposure of violence in mass media, political instability).

Belief systems affect all of us and differentiate this society (or subcultures) from others. This includes sexism, sex-role stereotyping, general acceptance of violence and norms about the family (Carlson, 1984).

**Figure 1: An Ecological Model (WHO, 2002)**

## Ecological Model (WHO, *Violence as a Public Health Issue*, 2002)



### 2) How we intend to use the model

#### a) *Pathways to Couple Violence: using an ecological model*

The Pathways to Couple Violence study is a pilot study that will be carried out in an area of social and economic disadvantage in Western Sydney, NSW. Using the ecological model as a guide, we intend to listen to the personal experiences of men and women involved in a relationship living in this area of Sydney to help us put into context the violence that they have experienced in this relationship. The study sets out to help us understand more fully than we do at present what is happening to couples when violence takes place. The intention is to help service providers and policy makers deepen their knowledge of the complexities involved in order to better help couples who experience violence.

The term “couple” is used deliberately. The intention is not to exclude people talking about child-parent violence if they talk about this in relation to the person-person violence, it is simply not the main focus of this study. Same sex couples are welcome to participate in the study.

Below are some examples of the questions that will guide the interviews:

- ❖ We would like to know the context in which such violence occurred:
  - What led up to this violence?
  - What helped them to get through this situation (resilience)?
  - What services were used (helpful or not helpful)?
  - What can help to prevent incidents in the future?

The research will be carried out in partnership with the Holy Family Education Centre which is situated in an area of Western Sydney that experiences high rates of couple violence. The Centre is open to all people in the community regardless of religion, culture, gender, age or walk of life.

We believe that current knowledge that guides policy and service delivery of couple violence uses a linear (and narrow), male to female framework to view couple violence. This leads to gaps in service provision including inadequate services for male perpetrators or male victims. The intention of using the ecological model is to broaden this approach to enable us to see different pathways that lead up to violence. We believe this presents a more real life perspective encompassing a wider range of people and experiences.

One of the weaknesses that Carlson (1984) noted about the model is that while it does allow for a broad spectrum of causal factors, it doesn't specifically identify every factor that might contribute to couple violence. This pilot study does not claim to identify “every factor” but it is designed to identify many causal factors particularly related to couple violence in an area of social and economic disadvantage in Western Sydney. From this we hope to expand the research and therefore stimulate other research in this field of study using this model.

### 3) Current model used to inform “domestic violence”

The perspective to look at “domestic violence” currently is derived from a linear model. I will provide a brief background to this model and perspective.

I use the term “linear” model to illustrate the difference in approaches when compared to the ecological model. Studies into couple violence have leant heavily on male dominance and patriarchy as the main causes of couple violence and not on multiple layers. See for example, Walby (1992), Yllo & Bograd (1988) and Summers (1975), for studies using a linear model focussed on male dominance and patriarchy<sup>3</sup>.

Dominant thinking around couple violence emanates from feminist theories, psychiatry and psychology (“battered women’s syndrome”) but excludes class and race relationships. It is acknowledged that even though couple violence does occur across the social spectrum, it does not occur with the same frequency (Evans, 2002). The contribution from psychiatry and psychology has highlighted causal factors of couple violence at the **individual level**. Some of the causal factors at the individual level include:

- Pathological phenomena (abnormal phenomena: depression, personality disorders and pathological dependencies);
- Expression of inner tension: inner forces over which one has little or no control);
- Instrumental strategy: a strategy to assert dominance over another to enhance self-esteem;
- Learned behaviour: the “nurture” of the nature/nurture debate;
- Biomedicine: treated by medication – depression, personality disorders, pathological dependencies;
- Social learning theory (Alburt Bandura) & trauma theory: relationship between abuse as a child and using abuse in adulthood; “battered women syndrome” and “learned helplessness” are used to explain why women stay in violent relationships (Evans, 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> There is an abundance of literature that supports this view and has developed from research on “violence against women”. I can recommend a report that presents a “synthesis” of research in this area, see Carlson, Worden, van Ryn, & Bachman (2003).

- Attachment theory refers to poor attachment to adults as a young child which extends into adult relationships and behaviour.
  - “resilience theory” was developed in response to this to show that protective factors such as highly developed cognitive skill, a sense of self worth, an internal locus of control, spirituality, availability of support from other people and involvement with a community all contributed to a successful adjustment despite challenging life experiences (Heller, Scott, Larrieu, D’Imperio & Borris, 1999).

Research into models used to inform couple violence uncovered that there have indeed been attempts to include social factors into thinking around couple violence. Both qualitative and quantitative research has been done to explain how age, race, class, gender and lifestyle issues (**sociological level**) interact with violence. In a study into levels of violence in families, it was found that violence in families is higher where poverty, low income and unemployment are prominent factors (Hood 1998, Johnson, 2000, Lupri 1990). James Gilligan (2001) wrote that inequality and relative deprivation are the main causes of violence *not* because these people are essentially more violent but because of the associated feelings of shame and worthlessness connected with the treatment of people in these circumstances. Complex, varied and changing reasons for violence were uncovered by Jane Gilgun (2001, 1996) after undertaking qualitative life interviews with men who had been violent.

#### **4) Evidence of a need for a new model**

During the last 30 years thinking around couple violence has changed, socially, politically and legally. Policies and programs dealing with couple violence have been put in place because the rates of couple violence were increasing due to the problem being more readily admitted by families and a shift towards it being more of a social responsibility. A main indicator of whether these policies and programs are addressing the needs of families is through a measurement of the prevalence rates of couple violence. It is acknowledged that prevalence rates of couple violence are difficult to analyse due to different research methodologies, sampling sizes and definitions used. However, during the last 30 years, nationally and internationally, even though conditions and policies around couple violence have improved, the prevalence rates have *not* decreased; apprehension violence orders (AVOs) and victims seeking assistance have significantly increased (Sarantakos, 2001).

A possible reason for the prevalence rates not decreasing could be that insufficient attention has been given to the complexities of the phenomena. Currently, only the final act of violence is recorded and reported in statistics, so the causes are either ignored or distorted which leads to policies and programs addressing the symptoms of the problem, not the causes or problems themselves (Sarantakos et al).

Anecdotal evidence is often a precursor to further, more systematic investigations. During the past four years, I have collected anecdotal evidence regarding a need for a new perspective in the area of couple violence. MHIRC was invited to attend, as an organization representing men's health issues, an "Action Planning Day for Domestic Violence" which was attended by 100 other people representing 46 different organisations on behalf of the safety of women in couple violence. MHIRC's involvement in this planning carried over 2-3 years and in that time, a considerable number of people approached me (as a member of MHIRC) in confidence to say that as service providers, they saw an increasing need for services for men and that there was a need for a change in perspective around couple violence. The main message was that, the safety of women and children is important but that in many situations, the whole of the family needed assistance as not one person or cause was to blame.

Further anecdotal evidence was derived from telephone enquiries by service providers, men's health representatives, and the general public to MHIRC about the lack of services for men as victims and/or perpetrators in situations of violence between couples.

*a) A move towards an ecological model*

The literature shows that variations of the ecological model have been used and recommended to be used in the research into couple violence. This indicates a need to combine both individual and sociological factors that may be contributing factors. Designed to enhance an understanding about how women influence partner violence, Foa, Cascardi, Zellner & Feeny (2000) developed a model with two spheres: psychological (women's trauma & psychological history, resilience etc.) and environmental (interpersonal contacts, institutional contacts etc.) (Evans, 2002). Lori Heise from the Centre for Health and Gender Equity in the United States, used an ecological model to explain the more complex aetiology of "gender-based violence". She wrote that because male dominance and gender hierarchy

do not explain why *all* men don't beat and rape women, an ecological framework is needed to conceptualise violence as a "multifaceted phenomenon grounded in an interplay among personal, situation, and socio-cultural factors". Heise suggests this will help researchers understand real life and complex reasons why couple violence occurs.

It is clear that new perspectives are needed for projects in the area of couple violence. There is a need for couple violence to be seen in the *context* of real life situations, including its complexities. This context would not exclude the safety of women or excuse the behaviour of men (or women) but include the well-being of families. The new perspective will be used to inform policy-makers, service providers and agencies to develop programs to prevent violence and to engage with families. In the area of men's health, it is clear that an ecological perspective could be one step towards a paradigm to shift men's health away from a pathological model.

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