Black battered women: New directions for research and Black feminist theory

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Charting a New Course for Feminist Psychology

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Black Battered Women: New Directions for Research and Black Feminist Theory

Carolyn M. West

After more than two decades of research, it is clear that intimate partner violence transcends race, economic class, and religious background (Goodman, Koss, & Russo, 1993). It has also been discovered among lesbian couples (West, 1998a) and dating, engaged, married, and divorced heterosexual couples (Erez, 1986; Neff, Holamon, & Schluter, 1995). The pervasiveness of this social problem has led some researchers to take a “color blind” approach, which is the assumption that the rates of aggression and the dynamics found in violent relationships are similar across ethnic groups (Williams, 1993). Alternatively, other researchers have considered violence to be a problem that plagues people of color, particularly African Americans (Hawkins, 1987).

The reality is that violence in the lives of Black women is both very similar and at times vastly different from the violence experienced by their White counterparts (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1994; Kanuha, 1996). The challenge for researchers is to articulate the racial similarities in intimate partner violence without negating the experiences of Black women. This should be done while simultaneously highlighting racial differences without perpetuating the stereotype that Black Americans are inherently more violent than other ethnic groups. Meeting this challenge requires researchers to chart a new course. In order to travel in a new direction, we must first understand where we have been. Accordingly, the first section of this chapter will review the research on racial differences and similarities in the rates and types of physical partner violence across the relationship continuum. In the second section, I will focus on new directions for research. More specifically, methodological problems may influence the research findings, and thus our understanding of racial differences in domestic violence. I will
review these research limitations and offer suggestions for more appropriate research methods. The goal of the final section is to articulate a Black feminist theoretical perspective that better explains violence in the lives of Black women.

RACIAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN PHYSICAL PARTNER VIOLENCE

The studies conducted to date present a complex, and at times a contradictory, picture of racial differences in the rates of physical partner violence (for reviews see Asbury, 1999; West, 1998b). Several investigators discovered that the rates were similar across ethnic groups. For instance, in a community sample, one-third of both Black and White women were physically abused (Lockhart, 1987, 1991). Likewise, similar rates of violence were found between Black and White women in shelter (O'Keefe, 1994), urban prenatal clinic (McFarlane, Parker, Soeken, Silva, & Reed, 1999), high school (Symons, Groer, Kepler-Youngblood, & Slater, 1994), and undergraduate samples (Rouse, 1988). These findings were discovered in nationally representative samples as well. According to the National Victim Survey, the three largest ethnic groups (Blacks, Whites, and Latino/as) reported similar rates of serious intimate partner violence (Bachman, 1994).

Although the rates of battering may be similar, the types and severity of violence may vary by ethnicity. For example, battered women who were recruited from family court and battered women's shelters reported comparable levels of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. However, when compared to Latinas and White women, Black women were more likely to have had weapons used against them. They were also more likely to be hospitalized as a result of the injuries sustained during a violent episode (Gondolf, Fisher, & McFerron, 1991; Joseph, 1997). A similar pattern of racial differences in severity of violence was discovered between incarcerated Black and White battered women (Richie, 1996). This greater severity of violence may be one explanation for why homicide by intimate partners is the leading cause of death for African-American women between the ages of 15 and 24 (National Center for Health Statistics, 1997).

Other studies more clearly indicate that Black women, when compared to their White counterparts, are at particular risk for victimization at every point on the relationship continuum. For instance, during the premartial period they experienced more mild and severe dating violence (DeMaris, 1990). In addition, among couples who were engaged to be married, Black women were more likely to have been hit or slapped (Boye-Beaman, Leonard, & Senchak, 1993; McLaughlin, Leonard, & Senchak, 1992). For many couples, these violent interactions continued into the marital relationship. Several large national probability samples revealed higher rates of wife assault in African-American families. In the First National Family Violence
Survey, which consisted of more than 2,000 households, the overall rate of Black husband-to-wife abuse was four times higher than that of White husband-to-wife abuse (113 vs. 30 per 1,000) (Cazeneuve & Straus, 1979; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). A similar pattern of racial differences emerged 10 years later when the researchers conducted a second national survey of more than 6,000 families. Although the rate of severe violence against Black women declined by 43%, they continued to be twice as likely as White women to have been battered (Hampton & Gelles, 1994).

Partner violence can also continue after the woman terminates the relationship, as in the case of divorced couples. The limited research on racial differences indicates that Black women were more likely than White or Mexican American women to be victimized by former spouses (Neff et al., 1995). Furthermore, this violence may continue over a long period of time. Despite having ended their abusive relationships, Sullivan and Rumpz (1994) found that one-third of the African-American women in their sample continued to be abused by the same partner 10 weeks after leaving a battered woman’s shelter. A similar pattern emerged in a longitudinal study that followed a predominately Black sample over three years. The researchers concluded that “ending the relationship does not necessarily end the violence” (Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998, p. 759).

The research also suggests that Black women are more likely to perpetrate partner violence. When compared to White women, they were approximately three times more likely to beat their husbands (Neff et al., 1995). Equally high rates of husband assaults were found in large probability samples. In the First National Family Violence Survey, Black wives were only slightly more likely to have slapped their husbands within the year prior to the survey. However, in comparison to White wives, they were almost twice as likely to have engaged in severe violence against their husbands (76 vs. 41 per 1,000) (Cazeneuve & Straus, 1979; Straus et al., 1980). A replication of the survey in 1985 revealed that the rate of wife-to-husband abuse committed by Black women rose to nearly three times greater than the rate for White women (108 vs. 39 per 1,000) (Hampton, Gelles, & Harrop, 1989).

In summary, some researchers found similar rates of partner violence across racial groups (Bachman, 1994; Lockhart, 1991). In contrast, other investigators discovered that Black women, when compared to their White counterparts, were significantly more likely to sustain and inflict aggression. Moreover, they were more likely to be victims of severe violence. This pattern was reported at every stage on the relationship continuum (Hampton et al., 1989; Neff et al., 1995).

### NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

The growing body of research on racial differences in domestic violence appears to be contradictory. Methodological problems may partially ac-
count for these findings. Specifically, there are definitional and measurement limitations as well as problems with how data has been collected, analyzed, and interpreted. The purpose of the next section is to discuss these limitations and offer new directions for research.

**Definitional and Measurement Problems**

Many investigators have focused on defining and measuring physical aggression. In order to distinguish between levels of violence, researchers have categorized aggressive acts as "mild" or "less injurious" forms of violence, which includes slapping, pushing, and shoving. Beatings and assaults with weapons have been classified as "severe" violence (Straus, 1990). Limiting the investigation of abuse to physical assaults can promote ease of comparison across studies. However, feminists argue that this narrow definition does not capture the full range of violence against women (Smith, 1994; Smith, Smith, & Earp, 1999).

These research limitations can be addressed in several ways. First, researchers can broaden the definition of partner violence to include psychological, emotional, and verbal abuse. After an extensive review of the literature, partner violence has been defined as "acts of recurring criticism and/or verbal aggression toward a partner, and/or acts of isolation and domination of a partner. Generally, such actions cause the partner to be fearful of the other or lead the partner to have very low self-esteem" (O'Leary, 1999, p. 19). Although researchers have been rather slow to turn their attention to psychological abuse, it is pervasive enough to warrant attention. For example, more than one-half of a community sample of physically abused women reported a high frequency, defined as once a week or more, of three types of emotional abuse, including restriction of activities, jealousy, and ridicule (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990). Moreover, the emotional impact of psychological abuse can be equally as detrimental as the emotional impact of physical violence. It has been linked to low self-esteem, depression, and fear (Sackett & Saunders, 1999). Despite the challenges of operationalizing psychological abuse, researchers should continue to make efforts to measure this form of aggression.

Psychological abuse is prevalent across ethnic groups. More than two-thirds of Black and White shelter residents were victims of emotional and verbal abuse (Joseph, 1997). Similarly high rates of possessiveness and rejection were discovered among Black, White, and Latino/a undergraduates (Rouse, 1988). Black women, like women of other ethnic backgrounds, can experience serious emotional consequences as a result of psychological abuse, such as symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (Dutton, Goodman, & Bennett, 1999). In addition, psychological abuse is likely to precede physical abuse (O'Leary, 1999). Although this pattern of abuse can occur regardless of ethnicity, African Americans were more likely to move from
verbal to physical aggression (Stets, 1990). Factors that are associated with this escalation of violence are worthy of additional investigation.

Sexual aggression should be incorporated into the definition of intimate violence as well. Researchers have defined rape as unwanted sexual penetration, perpetrated by force, threat of harm, or when intoxication or mental impairment make it impossible for the victim to consent to sexual contact (Warshaw, 1994). Although this definition is consistent with many legal statutes, it does not fully capture the range of date and marital rape in the lives of women. Therefore, researchers should move toward a more inclusive definition, such as “sex without consent, sexual assault, rape, sexual control of reproductive rights, and all forms of sexual manipulation carried out by the perpetrator with the intention or perceived intention to cause emotional, sexual, and physical degradation to another person” (Abraham, 1999, p. 592). Regardless of the definition, it is apparent that sexual abuse is an alarmingly common form of aggression. According to one of the most comprehensive studies conducted to date, 25% of women have been the victims of attempted or completed rape, and most of these rapes (57%) occurred in the context of a dating relationship (Warshaw, 1994). Substantial rates of marital rape have also been reported, with between 10% and 14% of ever-married or cohabiting women having been raped at least once by their partners (for a review see Mahoney & Williams, 1998). Given the negative mental health outcomes associated with sexual abuse, including anxiety, fear, sexual dysfunction, and depression, this form of aggression should be included in future studies (Neville & Heppner, 1999).

Like other forms of abuse, researchers have found comparable rates of date (Rouse, 1988) and marital rape (Russell, 1990) across ethnic groups. Based on the limited research, Black and White rape victims also exhibit similar physical, psychological, and sexual health problems (Wyatt, 1992). Despite these similarities, it is important to consider ethnic differences in the definition of sexual violence. Wyatt (1992) contends that “economic and legal factors have influenced cultural definitions of sexual assault for American women, and especially for women of African descent” (p. 78). This seems to be supported by the disturbing evidence that some African Americans, when compared to their White counterparts, endorse more rape myths, such as most rapes are committed by strangers and a man has a right to assume that a woman desires sexual intercourse if she allows a man to touch her in a sexual way (for reviews see Johnson, Kuck, & Schander, 1997; Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1995). Black women may not perceive themselves as victims if they believe these rape myths or adhere to a narrow definition of rape. As a result, their help-seeking efforts and post-rape recovery may be compromised (Neville & Pugh, 1997; Wyatt, 1992).

It is not enough to simply broaden the definition of partner violence to include psychological and sexual abuse. There are problems with how vi-
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violence is measured. More specifically, researchers have often measured discrete acts of physical violence by asking participants if they had sustained or inflicted varying degrees of aggression. When violence is measured in this way it appears that women use violent tactics with the same frequency as their male counterparts. This is because researchers have merely counted the number of violent acts experienced by a couple without considering the context, motives, and outcome of these aggressive actions. When these factors are taken into consideration, it is apparent that intimate partner violence is not generally mutual, but rather it is frequently violence committed against women (for a feminist review of these definitional and measurement problems see Currie, 1998).

One solution is to improve the instruments used to measure aggression. These changes are starting to take place. For example, the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS), one of the most widely used measures of partner violence, has been revised to include measures of psychological and sexual aggression (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). However, the focus on counting discrete episodes of violent acts continues to be a problem. According to feminist researchers, the solution is to broaden “the conceptualization of battering to define it in the context of women’s lives and to focus on battered women’s experiences rather than on the discrete events of male behaviors” (Smith et al., 1999, p. 183). This can be accomplished by using a flexible combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodology. By listening to the voices of battered women, researchers can gain greater insight into the context, motives, and outcomes of woman abuse. In addition, this research methodology will help to emphasize the overlapping nature of physical battery and rape in women’s lives.

Additional changes are necessary to shed light on the experiences of Black women. For example, there is the risk that standardized measures, although valid and reliable, may not adequately assess the experiences of diverse populations. These concerns appear to be legitimate. As evidence, a different factor structure emerged when the Index of Spouse Abuse (ISA), a scale designed to measure physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, was administered to a sample of Black women. This implies that they made different interpretations of many of the items than was found in the original instrument development (Campbell, Campbell, King, Parker, & Ryan, 1994). This finding also provides empirical support for the contention that “the consequences of excluding women of color from instrument development is that White European Americans and their experiences have been taken as the norm” (Sorenson, 1996, p. 137).

This problem can be solved by using diverse samples in instrument development. Greater cultural sensitivity can also be achieved by including scale items that reflect the types of violence experienced by Black women. For instance, abusers often use both racist and sexist slurs to demean and denigrate their victims. Evelyn Barbee (1992), an African-American nurse,
was physically assaulted in public. Prior to the assault, the Black assailant screamed "You Black bitch!" Although this is an anecdotal account, this example illustrates the importance of considering how psychological aggression may take different forms in the lives of Black women.

Data Collection, Analyses, and Interpretation of Results

Some researchers have collected data in a way that neglects the experiences of a broad range of Black battered women. For example, Black women may be excluded from samples or surveyed in small numbers, which make it impossible to conduct meaningful racial comparisons (for a Black feminist perspective on this data collection problem see T. C. West, 1999). Alternatively, other researchers rely on samples that are drawn from services that are overwhelmingly used by African Americans and the poor, such as the criminal justice system (Dutton et al., 1999; Erez, 1986), shelters for battered women or the homeless (Joseph, 1997; Sullivan & Rumpitz, 1994), and public hospitals (McFarlene et al., 1999). Certainly, individuals who utilize these services warrant attention because they are at increased risk for violence. Nevertheless, these samples are not representative of battered women or African Americans who have greater access to material resources.

Data collection is further limited by the focus on married heterosexual couples (Hampton & Gelles, 1994; Lockhart, 1987, 1991). As previously discussed, violence can occur across the relationship continuum. However poverty and social inequalities, such as the lack of marriageable men due to high rates of incarceration and unemployment, means that Black couples are disproportionately more likely to report lower rates of marriage and higher rates of divorce (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Consequently, researchers who focus exclusively on legally married Black couples will overlook violence among dating, cohabiting, and divorced couples.

These problems with data collection can be addressed in several ways. First, meaningful racial comparisons can be made by including larger samples of Blacks. Researchers are beginning to take these steps. The First National Family Violence Survey included only 147 African Americans (Straus et al., 1980). Ten years later, the number of surveyed Blacks rose to 600 (Hampton et al., 1989). Second, researchers can investigate within-group differences. For instance, they could compare the rates of battering between working-class and middle-class Blacks. When researchers used this methodology, they discovered that the level and types of violence varied among Blacks based on social class and gender (Hampton & Gelles, 1994; Lockhart, 1987; Russo, Denious, Keita, & Koss, 1997). This knowledge will enable service providers to target their intervention efforts more appropriately. In addition, this methodology can help avoid the problems associated with inappropriate racial comparisons. Finally, researchers
should investigate violence across the relationship continuum. Fortunately, more research is focusing on violence among Black couples who are dating (Clark, Beckett, Wells, & Dungee-Anderson, 1994; West & Rose, 2000) or who have terminated their relationship (Campbell et al., 1998; Moss, Pitula, Campbell, & Halstead, 1997; Neff et al., 1997). The next challenge is to investigate violence among Black lesbians, a population that is even more marginalized as a result of discrimination based on race, gender and sexual orientation (Kanuha, 1990; Mendez, 1996; Waldron, 1996).

After the data are collected, there can be problems with how it is analyzed. For example, researchers have often failed to control for indices of socioeconomic status when considering racial differences in battering. This is a significant problem because African Americans are overrepresented in socioeconomic and demographic categories that are at greater risk for violence. This includes individuals who are youthful, urban residents, and have lower educational, income, and occupational levels (Sorenson, Upchurch, & Shen, 1996). Consequently, what appears to be racial differences may in fact be socioeconomic differences between Blacks and Whites. As evidence, these racial differences disappear when income and husband's occupational and employment status are taken into consideration (Cazesane & Straus, 1979; Hampton & Gelles, 1994; Lockhart, 1987, 1991). Future researchers should control for these confounding variables.

During the final stages of the research process, biases in interpretations may become more apparent. More specifically, substantial rates of partner violence among some subgroups of Black Americans, coupled with the failure to consider socioeconomic status and other research limitations, such as inadequate sampling techniques, have in some cases contributed to inappropriate interpretations of the research findings. For instance, researchers compared 38 Black and 195 White students and concluded that: “The findings that Blacks were more involved in violence in courtship than other racial groups was expected. The violence that characterizes the Black subculture seems to enter also in courtship relations” (Plass & Gessner, 1983, p. 202). Not only is such an interpretation offensive, it precludes our understanding of battering in the African-American community. By focusing on violence as somehow innate or unique to the Black culture, investigators have fostered stereotypes, which can shape the direction of future research and public policy. If violence is perceived as inevitable, politicians and service providers may erroneously conclude that intervention efforts are futile (Hawkins, 1987). In response, community leaders and members may discourage research efforts for fear that the information will be used to further oppress them. Although their concerns are legitimate, the failure to document racial differences in partner violence limits the understanding of this problem and ultimately makes it difficult for Black battered women to receive assistance (Crenshaw, 1994).

Other researchers have attempted to highlight the racial similarities be-
tween battered Black and White women. For example, based on a small numbers of Black, Latina, and Asian women, Lenore Walker (1979) asserted that "Anglo and minority women alike told similar battering stories and experienced similar embarrassment, guilt and inability to halt their men's assaults" (p. 22). Her conclusions are not necessarily inappropriate. However, it becomes problematic when researchers interpret similarities to mean that racial differences are not worthy of attention or do not exist (Kanuha, 1996).

Feminist research that is culturally competent and sensitive can reduce some of these faulty research interpretations. This can be accomplished by involving participants in every step of the research process. When the research project is being conceptualized, investigators should invite community members and leaders to discuss how partner violence can best be defined and measured. Focus groups are an effective way to gather this information (Sorenson, 1996). African-American researchers and activists should also participate in the data collection. This will minimize participants' concerns about disclosing personal information or airing the community's "dirty laundry" to outsiders. Integrated research teams should be used to interpret the research findings (Fontes, 1997, 1998; Kanuha, 1996; Wyatt, 1994). Moss and colleagues (1997) explain the importance of this strategy by writing "Because the principal investigator and other authors of this article are upper-class White female feminists, we chose to collaborate with Black feminist women to aid us in understanding and interpreting the Black women's experiences with abuse" (p. 434). Finally, care should be taken in the dissemination of the findings. Participants may not have access to scholarly publications; therefore, the information should be made available through community leaders, religious institutions, ethnic events, and radio campaigns (Oliver, 2000; West, 1998b). A well-drafted, culturally sensitive statement concerning partner violence could also be published in Black oriented newspapers. This technique has been used to successfully raise the Black community's awareness concerning sexual harassment (Ransby, 1995) and rape (White, 1999).

To summarize, there can be problems at every stage of the research process from definitional and measurement limitations to how the data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted. In order to begin charting a new course, participants must be included at every stage of the research process from planning to implementing, interpreting, and disseminating the results.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

A broad range of theoretical perspectives have been used to explain domestic violence. Unfortunately, most partner violence theories are unidimensional, rather than interdisciplinary in nature. For example, microtheories seek to explain why some individuals commit more family
violence than others. These theories encompass the social learning perspective, which argues that individuals learn aggression by witnessing or experiencing violence in their families of origin. Other researchers have linked partner violence to intrapersonal difficulties, such as alcohol abuse use/abuse, or couples’ interpersonal problems, including marital discord and communication difficulties (for a review see Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 1997). There is a substantial body of literature to support these various microtheories. Although there has been less research on African Americans, domestic violence in this population has been linked to violence in the family of origin (DeMaris, 1990; Hampton & Gelles, 1994), alcohol use (Joseph, 1997; Neff et al., 1995), and marital discord (Lockhart, 1991; Lockhart & White, 1989). Microtheories are valuable because they highlight the similarities between ethnic groups. However, these theories have often been applied without the recognition of important ethnic group differences (Barnes, 1999; Bell & Mattis, 2000).

In contrast, macrotheories address important structural factors, including sexism, racism, and classism. These larger structural inequalities increase the likelihood of partner violence and must be addressed in the study of domestic violence among African Americans. Accordingly, the final section of this chapter will utilize a feminist perspective. Feminist scholars, regardless of their academic discipline, attribute partner violence to gender, power, and structural imbalance (for reviews see Bograd, 1988; Marin & Russo, 1999; Yllo, 1993). Although feminist theory has made important contributions to our understanding of domestic violence, it can be enhanced by including Black feminist thought, which will create a theoretical perspective that is more appropriate for understanding violence in the lives of African-American women. I will review the tenets of feminist theory and then offer a Black feminist analysis.

History of Patriarchy

Feminists contend that domestic violence is rooted in the history of patriarchy and male dominance. For example, based on English common law the “rule of thumb” legalized and regulated wife beating by granting a man the right to chastise his wife with a rod “not thicker than his thumb” (see Lentz, 1999 for a feminist history of wife abuse). This historical perspective is important; however, it fails to address Black women’s history. As Christensen (1988) pointed out, “No other woman has suffered physical and mental abuse, degradation, and exploitation on North American shores comparable to that experienced by the Black female” (p. 191). This victimization took the form of rape, forced breeding, and slavery. In addition, Black women received less protection from abuse. Although they were victimized by both White and Black men without legal sanction, assaults against White women were more likely to be severely punished, particularly
if the assailant was an African American (see Wriggins 1983 for a Black feminist historic perspective).

Black feminists would consider the historical trauma experienced by African-American women. Stories of rape and abuse are frequently shared across generations to warn Black girls and women of their vulnerability. As a result, contemporary Black women receive the message that their victimization is less significant and credible (Wyatt, 1992). These concerns are justified. Even today, forced sexual encounters that involve Black women are perceived as less serious and worthy of legal intervention (Foley, Evanic, Karnik, King, & Parks, 1995). Not surprisingly, this has contributed to a culture of silence, which ultimately discourages Black women’s help-seeking efforts (Neville & Pugh, 1997; Wyatt, 1992).

The Intersection of Sexism, Racism, and Classism

Based on this brief historical overview, it is clear that a feminist theoretical perspective that focuses on patriarchy and sexism as the primary source of domestic violence can not fully explain violence in the lives of Black women. According to Black feminists, researchers and theorists must acknowledge the overlap and intersectionalities of various forms of oppression (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1994; Richie, 1996). Bograd (1999) explains how this can be applied to domestic violence:

We exist in social contexts created by the intersections of systems of power (e.g., race, class, gender, and sexual orientation) and oppression (prejudice, class stratification, gender inequality, and heterosexist bias). ... In this framework, domestic violence is not a monolithic phenomenon. Intersectionalities color the meaning and nature of domestic violence, how it is experienced by self and responded to by others, how personal and social consequences are represented, and how and whether escape and safety can be obtained. (p. 276)

Intersectionality explains how Black women can be both simultaneously advantaged and disadvantaged as victims. For example, when compared to poor women and lesbians, social class and heterosexual privilege can protect middle-class or heterosexual Black women from some types of aggression. At the same time, racism can make it difficult for Black women, regardless of their economic status and sexual orientation, to escape racially based forms of oppression and violence (Bograd, 1999; Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1994). The combination of sexism, racism, and classism not only influences domestic violence, but influences the range of violence experienced by victims, the imbalances in male-female gender roles, the structure of social institutions that support partner violence, and the victims’ help-seeking behavior. A Black feminist analysis will be presented below.
The Range of Violence

Feminists argue that intimate partner violence is merely one example of violence in the lives of women. They advocate the use of a broader definition, which could encompass violent acts such as incest, sexual harassment in the workplace, forced prostitution, and female infanticide (Marin & Russo, 1999). Other researchers have documented the broad range of violence experienced by Black women (West, Williams, & Siegel, 2000; Wyatt, Axelrod, Chin, Carmona, & Loeb, 2000). However, Black feminists would also consider the influence of community violence. Black feminist theologian T. C. West (1999) argues that “For womanists, violence against women within the Black communities must never be separated from an understanding of violence against the community” (p. 120). Other researchers have supported her contention. Exposure to community violence has been linked to dating aggression among African-American adolescents (Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997). It has also been linked to rape. As a result of poverty, Black women are more likely to live in dangerous communities. Erratic work hours often force them to travel at night or to rely on public transportation, which leaves them vulnerable to assaults. Black rape victims are astute enough to make this association between their unsafe environment and their sexual assaults (Wyatt, 1992). Finally, Black feminists also suggest that researchers investigate the connection between intimate partner violence among African Americans and the societal violence that they experience, for example in the form of police presence in the Black community, and international violence against African people, including military action (Collins, 1998).

Imbalance of Gender Roles

Feminists believe that the patriarchal structure of society gives men more power and control in their families (Marin & Russo, 1999). Black feminists make similar assertions about Black family violence. However, Black feminists point out that African-American families have seldom conformed to “traditional” family configurations, with dominant men who function as primary income producers and women who are passive and responsible for household and child care duties (Collins, 1990). Historically, Black women have been compelled to adopt relatively androgynous roles; for example, they have been able to function as both wage earners and family caretakers. In contrast, a substantial percentage of Black men have not been able to function in the traditional role of providers for their families because they have been denied access to economic resources and jobs (Ucko, 1994).

Although it is not always economically possible, many African-American couples attempt to enact these traditional gender roles and family configurations. This may contribute to conflict and violence. For instance,
middle-class Black men who endorse the belief that Black women have more opportunities were more accepting of violence (Cazenave, 1983), whereas Black women who endorsed such beliefs were more likely to be victimized. The young Black women surveyed by White (1997) perceived their working class boyfriends as dominant and aggressive. Although they did not enjoy the sexual abuse that accompanied these gender roles, they frequently acquiesced to the sexual demands of their partners. They believed that sexuality was one of the few arenas where their boyfriends could assert their fragile sense of masculinity. Characterizing themselves as supporters and caretakers required them to avoid the “emasculating” of their boyfriends by refusing sexual contact, even if it meant tolerating sexual aggression. Despite the aggression in their dating relationships, they had a strong desire to perform as traditional caretakers and for their boyfriends to behave as protectors, roles that have been linked to partner violence. Similar findings were discovered in community (Moss et al., 1997) and incarcerated samples (Richie, 1996) of battered Black women. Because of their perceived economic advantage, many of these women felt guilty about their accomplishments, while simultaneously feeling responsible for their partners’ limited economic opportunities. According to Richie (1996), this set of belief patterns is an example of “gender entrapment,” which can make it difficult for some battered Black women to extract themselves from abusive relationships.

According to Black feminists we should dispel the myth that Black women, when compared to their Black counterparts, are financially and socially more advantaged. This notion may be linked to a misinterpretation of history. Black women were able to obtain jobs, for example as domestic workers, when Black men were unemployed. Although it may appear that Black women are privileged, the reality is that race and gender discrimination frequently leaves them more impoverished than other race-gender groups (Sanchez-Huclés, 1997). Black feminists have also challenged the Black community to reconceptualize its notions of Black masculinity. Rather than attempting to adhere to traditional male roles, which emphasize dominance and aggression, African Americans should seek to create more egalitarian, cooperative, androgynous roles for both genders. Perhaps this may reduce some of the conflict, frustration, and potential violence that results from trying to enact unattainable gender roles (hooks, 1992).

Structure of Social Institutions

Feminists assert that major societal institutions, including the media, legal and health care systems, reflect patriarchal values and encourage and maintain violence against women. For example, the criminal justice system often fails to adequately protect battered women and prosecute their victimizers. Likewise, medical professionals may miss signs of partner violence
or fail to detect the connection between battering and other physical and mental health problems (Marin & Russo, 1999). Social institutions may be unsupportive of Black battered women as well. They may endure an oppressive police force that is likely to arrest both the victim and her abusive partner (Moss et al., 1997), negative media images that give the impression that they deserve to be abused (Bell & Mattis, 2000; West, 2000), laws that make it difficult for them to extricate themselves from violent relationships (Kupenda, 1998), and a health care system that is unresponsive to their needs (Richie & Kanuha, 1993). All these factors converge to exacerbate the battered woman’s feelings of helplessness. bell hooks (1989), a Black feminist scholar, makes this point eloquently when she writes, “I was hit by my companion at a time in life when a number of forces in the world outside our home had already ‘hit’ me, so to speak, made me painfully aware of my powerlessness, my marginality” (p. 85).

The obvious solution is to create more culturally appropriate services to meet the needs of both Black victims and perpetrators (Williams & Becker, 1994). Black feminist thought can make a significant contribution by keeping the focus on historical perspectives. During slavery and well into reconstruction, Black women witnessed their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers being abducted by slave owners, police officers, and Klansman. For the contemporary Black woman, having her partner arrested may be reminiscent of these earlier historical traumas. Although she wants the violence to stop, she may be reluctant to thrust her batterer into a system that is discriminatory, hostile, and overcrowded with Black males. Batterers realize this and will often use this history to further manipulate their partners. Black feminists recommend that this history be acknowledged while simultaneously holding African-American men accountable for their abuse (White, 1994; Richie, 1985).

Help-Seeking Behavior

Despite the violence sustained by battered women, feminists believe that they are active help seekers (Bograd, 1988; West, Kaufman Kantor, Jasinski, 1998). Black feminists have also highlighted the survival and resistance strategies of Black abuse victims (T. C. West, 1999). However, they criticize traditional feminist theorists for failing to recognize the race based stereotypes that make the claims of Black battered women appear inauthentic. Alternatively stated, Black women have historically been depicted as angry, aggressive, domineering, masculine Sapphires (West, 2000). This image makes Black women seem contrary to the societal stereotype of victims who are more deserving of sympathy and intervention, most notably victims who are White, middle-class, passive, weak, and do not physically defend themselves (Harrison & Esqueda, 1999). Rather than refuting these stereotypes, in some cases feminists have developed theories that reinforce them,
such as the battered woman’s syndrome (Allard, 1991; Ammons, 1995; Moore, 1995).

This places Black battered women in a disadvantaged position when they claim victimization status. Some women internalize this image and consequently perceive physical retaliation as an appropriate response to abuse. One Black woman described her self-defense technique: “I started hitting him back, I got tired of hitting on me. And I popped him across the head with a skillet one day” (Moss et al., 1997, p. 447). Although this form of self-defense may be effective in the short term, it may contribute to an escalation of violence and possibly murder. As previously discussed, homicide by intimate partners is a leading cause of death for African-American women (National Center for Health Statistics, 1997). Another drawback is that the Sapphire image, coupled with Black women’s propensity to fight back when physically (Moss et al., 1997) and sexually assaulted (Bart & O’Brien, 1985), makes them appear to be mutual combatants. As result, service providers may neglect the violence in Black relationships. In some cases, they may perceive the violence as normative or as an example of the bestial nature of African Americans. For instance, Officer Laurence Powell, who was convicted in federal court of violating the civil rights of Rodney King, referred to a domestic violence call at a Black family’s home as something out of Gorillas in the Mist (Ammons, 1995).

Black feminists offer several solutions to combating these stereotypes. Service providers need to understand the broad range of stereotypes. In addition, to being perceived as angry Sapphires, Black women may be characterized as self-sacrificing Mammies who should keep the family together, even at the expense of their personal safety. They may also be viewed as Jezebels who invite rape because of their seductive mannerisms or attire. Service providers need to educate their colleagues and Black battered women about the damage done by these images (Ammons, 1995; Brice-Baker, 1994; West, 1998c).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to begin charting a new course in the research on domestic violence in the Black community. If we look toward the past, we find that the research has been contradictory. In some studies African-American women are equally as likely as their White counterparts to be victimization (Bachman, 1994; Lockhart, 1991), in other studies they sustain and inflict more partner aggression (Hampton et al., 1989; Neff et al., 1995). Methodological problems, including definitional and measurement limitations and problems with how the data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted, further add to the confusion about racial differences. The solution is to involve research participants at every stage of the research
process from planning to implementing, interpreting, and disseminating the results (Fontes, 1997). Another solution is to develop a new framework for investigating violence in this population. Researchers have taken a “color blind” approach, which is the assumption that violence is similar across ethnic groups (Williams, 1993). Conversely, other researchers have considered violence to be a problem that plagues African Americans (Hawkins, 1987). Neither approach is appropriate. However, a Black feminist perspective can move scholars toward a deeper understanding of violence in the lives of African-American women. This approach should consider the Black women’s history; the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism; the range of violence experienced by Black women; the imbalance of gender roles; the structure of social institutions; and help-seeking behaviors. A Black feminist model has already been shown to increase anti-rape advocacy in Black communities (White, Potgieter, Strube, Fisher, & Umana, 1997; White, Strube, Fisher, 1998). Perhaps by embracing this perspective, we can begin to chart a new course by reversing the tide of intimate partner violence.

REFERENCES


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