

Viewpoint: An analysis of domestic violence

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By Dr. Ganson Purcell Jr.

In the run-up to, and the day after, Valentine's Day, The Daily News published three major articles on domestic violence, concluding on the 15th with Katie Farrell's reflection on White Ribbon Day (Feb. 14) during which "men of good heart" had been requested "to put on a ribbon to show their stance against domestic violence and abuse of women." One week later, (Feb. 22), in the small print, lower right-hand daily feature encapsulated as Heard Around Town is a rejoinder from an organization identified as The National Coalition of Free Men (NCFM).

The NCFM points out that males in domestic relationships have been abused with weapons such as knives, broken glass and (flung) ashtrays; and that such male victims "and their children deserve the same dignity as female victims, but instead they're stigmatized, ignored and downplayed." (Please note the implements of injury cited; they are important — see below.)

What is going on here? Are we simply engaged in the time-old process of "gender jousting" — albeit in this instance about an issue of critical, indeed vital, importance? We are not; rather, this exchange of viewpoints offers a timely opportunity to identify key variations in episodes of violence in relationships. And by doing so, we can lay the groundwork for remediation and primary prevention.

First, let's agree that anger is innate in the human psyche, and that anger provoked can lead to violence in all kinds of human interactions. Since long-term human co-habiting partnerships are a fundamental form of social existence, we will not be surprised (albeit distressed) that violence will occasionally occur in domestic relationships. Second, let us also agree that if children are a product and component of the relationship, they inevitably stand to suffer if abuse arises.

Then, for enlightenment, let us turn to the work of Michael P. Johnson (associate professor of Sociology and Women's Studies, emeritus, Penn. State University, mpj@psu.edu). In a career spanning more than 30 years, Dr. Johnson and colleagues have studied domestic violence (and many other issues). In a piece entitled "A 'General' Theory of Intimate Partner Violence: A Working Paper" (available through Johnson's Web site), he identifies the four main types of Intimate Partner Violence: 1) situational couple violence; 2) intimate terrorism; 3) violent resistance; and 4) mutual violent control. No. 3, violent resistance, and No. 4, mutual violent control, while important, are infrequent and will not be considered further here.

Situational couple violence is the most frequent form and is characterized by: a) a disagreement escalates to an angry argument and leads to violence; b) it can be an isolated incident or become recurrent; c) the violence is equally instigated by male or female; but, d) males do more damage and can create enormous fear. (It is in such cases that the "weapon" may be the ready availability of a kitchen knife, a broken glass or an ashtray — see above). Anger management or couple's therapy may be effective interventions.

Intimate terrorism is the dreaded state. In this form of intimate partner violence: a) the batterer terrorizes and takes complete control of the partner; b) through an orchestrated process that may include (progressively): economic control, psychological abuse, threats of violence; and, c) ultimately, physical violence. Intimate terrorism is almost always male-initiated; and, while less frequent than situational couple violence, nonetheless creates two million victims per year. Furthermore, it is by far the form of domestic violence that destroys lives.

Intimate terrorism thus far has defied effective prevention or successful remediation. It is for these reasons, as well as destruction of families and perpetuation by affected children, that the major focus of societal and organizational efforts remains appropriately addressed to women and children who are victims of domestic violence.

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