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Identifying Domestic Violence:

A Call for Advocates

Tess C. O'Reilly

Healthy and open communication about the dynamics of domestic violence and patriarchy are essential to dismantling the roots and causes of abuse. To examine these two stigmatized concepts, definitions must be established; for this paper, patriarchy will be defined as an ideological and social position where men hold power over all other identities (Jackson 2003). The term domestic violence will be used to describe the assertion of power and control over another person through repetitive abuse and manipulation (Kelly 2016). While patriarchy may not be the issue at hand, it has propelled domestic violence to impact the way American society views abuse against wom-

en, as well as within and against the LGBTQ community. Advocates can learn to identify violence and abuse during tension, post tension, and reconciliation stages (Kelly and Westmarland 2016); consider why survivors choose to stay; and change the language surrounding survivors.

There have been several moments in legislative history that have reshaped the way society approached issues pertaining to domestic violence. Up until the late 19th century, a man could choose any object of his choice to abuse his wife—as long as the object was no bigger than his thumb (Walker 2002, 85). When instances of physical injury were deemed detrimental

to the woman's health and were brought before the court (nine stitches often being the medical standard), male judges typically sided with their male counterparts (Walker 2002). Although this "rule of thumb" was to act as a limitation of abuse, it provided no protection and instead promoted the acceptance of violence against women in the name of patriarchy (Walker 2002). It is important to note that this was also during a time when there was no account for protection from domestic violence for LGBTQ identifying individuals (Walker 2002). The culturally-deemed invalidity of their relationships made seeking help difficult; the heterosexual-man-abuses-wife dynamic was the unspoken standard, thereby dismissing the wide variety of other relationship dynamics that may be experiencing the same abuse. Jumping forward two centuries, great improvements have been made in legal support for those experiencing violence. Social services now exist to assist individuals in filing for protection orders, providing safe housing, and facilitating positive discussions of healthy relationships. Society has also witnessed the national legalization of homosexual marriages.

Too long has our culture relied on the precedence of partnerships being between a man and a woman. By doing this we eliminate support to a monumental group within our society. In "Transgender People, Intimate Partner Abuse, and the Legal System," Leigh Goodmark presents two case studies of trans-women who were murdered by their partners and the way in which the court handled it (Goodmark 2013). Had these individuals been cis-women, the situation would have been labeled as domestic violence without question. However, both instances were instead ruled as hate-crimes (Goodmark 2013). By mislabeling abuse, we misunderstand proper avenues for relief. For example, one implication of mislabeling a crime as a hate-crime instead of domestic violence is the decreased resources for survivors. Like the "rule of thumb" back in the 19th century, we again can carefully assess the role of legal protection in terms of domestic violence. The progress made to protect female survivors has yet to extend itself to the LGBTQ community (Goodmark 2013). By removing the generalization of identity as a source of crime and focusing on the abuser's role, as we would in a cis-heterosexual relationship, average citizens can begin to take the necessary steps in supporting individuals of all identities experiencing violence. Moreover, true support cannot be achieved until we fully understand the

TRANS:

Identifies with a different gender than what was assigned at birth

ADVOCATE:

A person who emotionally supports a survivor of domestic violence with empowerment and empathy

CIS:

Identifies with the same gender as what was assigned at birth

complexity and diversity that is relevant in every intimate partner relationship. As a first step, we—as active members in our community—can educate ourselves on red flags to better identify instances of abuse.

Liz Kelly and Nicole Westmarland lay out these red flags in three stages: tension, post-tension (or often called "outburst"), and reconciliation (Kelly and Westmarland 2016). During the tension stage, the survivor is experiencing, at minimum, emotional battering by their abuser, which typically causes the survivor to experience guilt, nervousness, and/or agitation. An abuser may begin to capitalize on these emotions to retain their status of power. Over time—whether hours or days—there comes to be an acceptance of abuse where the survivor does not reach out for help but rather strategizes ways to keep themselves safe within the relationship. This stage is very fragile because the survivor's understanding of trust is skewed. They accept the perpetrator's truth as the sole truth, which thereby alienates them from other relationships in their life (Kelly and Westmarland 2016). Caroline Clements and Daljit Sawhney explain in "Coping with Domestic Violence" how hopelessness relates to emotional battering, and how it pertains to the persistence of violence. They argue, "individuals who

develop negative expectations about the occurrence of highly desired outcomes, who also feel helpless about changing the likelihood of these outcomes, are likely to develop a more generalized expectation of hopelessness" (Clements 2000). When an abuser convinces their victim that they are unworthy of relief, the hope for such relief diminishes.

By manipulating survivors in such a way, abusers can maintain control and power within their relationship. This makes the survivor malleable and predictable in the eyes of an abuser, who is then capable of acting and reacting in certain ways to attain a desired result. An example of this may be a partner asking their significant other to stop talking to one of their friends. They may say, "You know, they don't like you anyway. They're only using you because you drive them to work when they need it. I don't use you like that. I'll never use you like that. Cut them out of your life and you'll be better off." Here, the abuse has already begun.

Furthermore, another way abusers maintain control within relationships is by acting sporadically and unpredictably. By being unable to anticipate forthcoming trauma, a survivor's emotions begin to mirror the lack of stability in the relationship (Clements 2000). To illustrate this, imagine an individual perceiving a threat and preparing to be attacked without the ability to avoid it, but then suddenly receiving care and sympathy from their abuser. The survivor's tension is met with comfort, instilling a lack of trust in their own perception of the situation. An abuser can utilize this destabilizing technique to make the survivor feel unstable and para-

noid, like they were prematurely nervous for nothing. In "Feeling Bad about Being Sad" Brock Bastian explains, "...reflecting negatively on the self in response to negative emotional experiences has been shown to further aggravate those same emotions" (2012, 70). In other words, when an abuser convinces their victim that they are being melodramatic and overly sensitive, the survivor will soon come to believe it themselves. The abused individual may begin to blame themselves for the abuse, accepting that the trauma is caused by their supposed wrong-doings and negative reactions (Clements 2000).

Following the tension stage, the post-tension stage ushers in the physical outburst of assault (Kelly 2016). Physical trauma comes in many forms: some abusers may target the rib, abdomen, or other hidden areas to avoid discovery of the abuse, while others have been known to mainly target their victim's face and neck areas (Karakurt, Patel, Whiting, and Koyutürk 2016, 84). Strangulation can also be intensely detrimental to a survivor's health (Domestic Shelters 2016). It has been well documented that if the brain goes without oxygen for more than two seconds, long term cognitive disabilities, loss in vision, and seizures can result (Domestic Shelters 2016). Traumatic brain injuries resulting from strangulation have a prevalence rating of 30–74% in intimate violent relationships (Karakurt et al. 2016, 84).

To determine the long-term effects of abuse, Karakurt and her colleagues searched through testimonies from women who claimed to have experienced domestic violence and by those who have not. They were attempting to find correlating symptoms associated with domestic violence, and how acknowledging these symptoms may better help medical practitioners to detect abuse. Throughout their research, they found many correlations between PTSD and reactions to violence; one specific reaction has been termed the "learned fear response" (Karakurt et al. 2016). When a survivor is experiencing an assault, they may have physical reactions such as shaking, rapid heart rate, nausea, and shortness of breath; in subsequent instances of conflict, a survivor can re-live these physical reactions without any direct contact from their abuser (Karakurt et al. 2016). This magnifies the experience of abuse even when physical trauma is not present. This can be representative of the long-term impacts from instances of abuse—whether it occurred ten minutes or ten years ago, the impact of trauma is not only long lasting but deeply suppressed.

Ultimately, individuals who have survived domestic abuse exhibit a wide variety of coping strategies. While onlookers may criticize someone's choice to stay in an abusive relationship, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of this decision.

The final red flag is the reconciliation stage. An example of this would be an abuser apologizing profusely, promising the abuse was situational, perhaps due to an action committed by the survivor. The abuse and exploitation has dropped by this third stage, but eventually tension rises again (Baker 1997). Domestic violence is never an isolated incident. Though one particularly frightening incident may stand out above the rest, it stems from—and is fueled by—the systematic oppression of power, control, and patriarchy.

Ultimately, individuals who have survived domestic abuse exhibit a wide variety of coping strategies. While onlookers may criticize someone's choice to stay in an abusive relationship, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of this decision. Phyllis Baker explains the multitude of coping forms that are practiced by survivors of domestic violence in her ethnography “And I Went Back: Battered Women's Negotiation of Choice” (2009). She conducted sixteen in-depth interviews with women who spent an extended amount of time in domestic violence shelters, many of whom sought out formal networks for assistance, such as crisis centers and law enforcement. Despite these resources, many of these same women also returned to their abuser. This, like fleeing or seeking legal support, is a way to cope. Baker explains this coping strategy as a direct opposition to the “dominant culture script,” which is a largely over-generalized solution to fleeing domestic violence: pack your bags, get a lawyer, and remove all ties with the abuser (2009, 56). Although this solution may be

applicable to certain cases, there is no “one size fits all” approach. Various factors such as financial needs, child care assistance, and threat of injury are relevant when making the decision to leave or mend a relationship. Whether maintaining the relationship or fleeing the violence, every survivor is actively using their agency and coping techniques to properly serve their situation-specific needs.

By the same token, a survivor may abandon the dominant culture script and exhibit what Clements and Sawhney call “emotion-focused” coping (2000). An example of this is safety planning, where a survivor has a hidden bag containing survival items in case they need to flee a highly violent situation. Another technique is placating, where the survivor tends to their abuser’s needs during the tension stage to avoid an outburst. As human beings, we make autonomous decisions to keep ourselves safe in traumatic situations. The careful consideration and discussion of deeply rooted patriarchy can be practiced every day by a change in our vocabulary. Advocates can replace the term “victim” in their discourse. Baker continually emphasized that by labeling someone as a “victim,” they are stripped of their agency (2009). Instead, survivors of domestic abuse can be referred to as just that: survivors. It is important to not demoralize the various strategies used by survivors but rather explore them to develop a wider understanding of the complexity of domestic violence.

To summarize, relationships are complex and consist of many different identities. Whether cis, trans, or something in between, violence expands well beyond the male-female dichotomy and therefore demands our attention. Too often are non-binary conforming individuals at a disadvantage because of their identity. We all have the capability to play an active role in identifying domestic violence and we all have the power to be advocates for justice in our community. Advocates can learn to help identify the three stages of domestic violence, educate themselves on the various coping mechanisms used by survivors, and change the discourse surrounding intimate partnerships and those experiencing abuse. By understanding that these people battle their trauma as autonomous, strong, and competent beings, we are able to validate the agency lived by these people.

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