

INTIMATE PARTNER HOMICIDE

Intimate Partner Homicide:
A Review of the Male Proprietariness and the Self-Defense Theories

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Abstract

In recent years, more attention has been focused on domestic violence. The focus of this article is on the most serious aspect of domestic violence, intimate partner homicide. Although both men and women kill their intimate partners, it appears that differences exist in the motivation behind the homicide in both cases. The male proprietariness theory and the self-defense theory are presented as a means of understanding the gender differences in spousal homicide. These theories suggest that the dynamics of the relationship play an important role in the increasing violence, which eventually results in homicide in certain instances. The implications of these theories are presented as a means of reducing the number of domestic homicides.

Intimate Partner Homicide

Between 1979 and 1998 in Canada, the annual rate of spousal homicide was 10 wives and 3 husbands per million couples in Canada. The rate has gradually declined over the years, for wives the rate dropped from 15 per million couples in 1979 and 7 per million couples in 1998, and for husbands the rate dropped from 5 per million couples in 1987 to 2 per million couples in 1998 (Statistics Canada, 2000). Nevertheless, interest sparked by media coverage of recent spousal homicides over the past few months in Ontario indicates that concern should still be focused on domestic violence. When homicide occurs in the home, it is men who most often kill women and children. Nevertheless, women are capable of violence and about once each month, a woman kills her mate. However, there appear to be inherent differences in both the nature and extent of male and female spousal homicide. Even when women react with violence towards their partners, the results are often very different. Statistics Canada (2000) reported women were three times more likely than men to be injured by spousal violence, more than twice as likely to report being beaten, and five times more likely to report being choked. Women tend to slap, kick, or throw things. Men throw punches, attempt to choke their partners, or use a weapon. Various theories (sociological, psychological, and biological) have been proposed to explain gender differences with respect to violence, however, these viewpoints are generally encompassed by two major theories regarding male and female spousal homicide. The male sexual proprietariness theory and the self-defense theory, respectively, suggest the dynamics of intimate relationships influence homicidal behaviour.

Male Sexual Proprietariness Theory

Wilson and Daly are the major proponents of the male sexual proprietariness theory (Daly & Wilson, 1988; Wilson & Daly, 1993). They suggest the union of marriage must be understood as ultimately sexual and reproductive in nature. They suggest that in the majority of societies, men purchase their wives' productive and reproductive capacities. Legal restrictions on sexual access (i.e., adultery laws) highlight the rights men feel they should have over women's sexual and reproductive capacities. In support of the theory, they point out that cross-culturally and historically, sexual intercourse between a married woman and a man other than her husband was a crime, and if it occurred, the husband was often entitled to damages, violent revenge, or divorce (Pollack, 1950). In 'primitive' societies, double standards of marital fidelity are the norm. In modern industrial nations, adultery encompasses the infidelities of the husband as well as the wife, although Daly, Wilson, and Weghorst (1982) suggest that the modern shift toward sexually indiscriminate adultery law does not imply that women and men have stopped reacting differently to their spouses' infidelities. Historically, according to Asian legal traditions and Roman law, and even as recently as 1974 in Texas, a violent revenge by the victimized husband upon the adulterers was legitimate. In the United States, adultery has been viewed as a provocation reducing murder to manslaughter (Daly & Wilson, 1988). It has been suggested that adultery has distinct consequences for men, such that men may be uncertain of the paternity of any offspring that are born. Therefore, legally, men have been given power and control over women's sexual and reproductive capacities.

Problems arise out of men's desire to control women and their reproductive capacities; 'men around the world think and talk about women and marriage in proprietary terms' (Daly & Wilson, 1988, p.200). Proprietary men not only view their partners as

theirs exclusively, but also experience feelings of entitlement. They perceive that they are at risk of losing control of their wives' reproductive capacities, therefore losing ground in the reproductive competition. In fact, threats to kill are viewed as coercive tactics meant to terrorize wives and keep them under their husband's control (Bernard, Vera, Vera, & Newman, 1982; Polk & Ranson, 1991; Showalter, Bonnie, & Roddy, 1980), signified by the popular declaration "If I can't have her, no one can". Wilson and Daly chose the word 'proprietaryness' to describe these behaviours, as it implies a more encompassing mindset than the word 'jealousy', which often implies excessiveness or social undesirability. Within this theory, the major issues that predominate include adultery, jealousy, desertion, and male control (Dobash & Dobash, 1984).

Research Evidence in Support of the Male Proprietaryness Theory

Sexual jealousy

Jealousy appears to be the leading homicide motive in many studies, often caused by known or suspected adultery or the woman terminating the relationship. In their standardized homicide reporting, police in Canada identify one pertinent motive from their standard lists, which include categories such as "argument/quarrel", "anger/hatred", "general domestic"; in 1991-92, 52% of the intimate homicides were attributed by the police to an argument or quarrel and a further 24% to jealousy (Wilson & Daly, 1994). Block and Christakos (1995) examined 2556 intimate partner homicides that occurred in Chicago over a 29-year period, and found sexual jealousy was a motive in up to 19% of male offenders who killed their former common-law partners and extramarital affairs resulted in up to 20% of male offenders who killed their ex-girlfriends. Similarly, Chimbos (1998) explored the motives of 62 cases of spousal homicide in Greece, and found that 28 (45.2%) of the spousal killings occurred as a result of conflict over extramarital, sexual and love affairs. Interview studies of the surviving killer, witnesses, friends and relatives suggest that a large majority of spousal homicides have evidently been precipitated by the husband accusing the wife of sexual infidelity and/or by her decision to terminate the marriage (Chimbos, 1978; Crawford & Gartner, 1992; Showalter, Bonnie, & Roddy, 1980).

Age

According to Canadian data the risk of being killed by one's legal spouse is maximal for teenage wives; women under 25 years of age were killed at a rate of 29 per million (Homicide Survey, 1999), with similar results in the United States (Mercy & Saltzman, 1989). Following from an evolutionary theory, one would suspect that men might be especially likely to kill expendable postmenopausal wives. However, Wilson and Daly (1988) suggest that jealous, proprietary motives would be particularly prevalent among men with younger wives for various reasons. Firstly, younger women are more attractive to men (Cunningham, 1986; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992), being a younger wife is associated with a greater probability that she will end an unsatisfactory marriage, attract the attention of other men, and become remarried (Glick & Lin, 1987).

Violence as Control

Violence and homicide have been linked to the man's need for control in the relationship. Control is attained through the use of violence, with sub-lethal assaults and threats of homicide being effective control mechanisms (Campbell, 1992; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Polk & Ranson, 1991; Showalter et al., 1980).

Furthermore, Daly and Wilson(1988) argue that spousal homicide is a dysfunctionally extreme manifestation of similar conflicts that involve sublethal marital violence. In fact, many women who are killed by their husbands were known to have been physically abused by them (Campbell, 1992; Counts, Brown, & Campbell, 1992; Wallace, 1986). Examining femicide in Dayton, Ohio, in 1980, Campbell (1992) determined that 64% of the 28 women killed by an intimate partner were known to have been physically abused by him. This percentage is believed to be an underestimate of level of abuse that actually occurred. In Canada, between 1991 and 1997, investigating officers had knowledge of previous domestic violence in 56% of all spousal homicides.

Estrangement

Violent coercion and threats serve to intimidate the victim, yet, they also increase her motivation to escape the relationship. However, choosing to leave the relationship may lead to escalated coercion, such that possessive men may be more motivated to kill when they perceive their female partners intend to leave them. Wallace (1986) reported that 98 of 217 women slain by their husbands in New South Wales, Australia, had left their killers or were in the process of leaving. When examining the homicide rates for separated partners in Canada, New South Wales, and Chicago, wives were at far greater risk when separated as compared to when coresiding (Wilson & Daly, 1993). Specifically, the immediate post-separation time appears to be a time of risk, particularly the first two months after separation. Wilson and Daly (1993) suggest that information from cases in the Chicago police files support the suggestion that homicide follows the wife's decision to terminate the relationship much more often than the husband's.

Similarly, Block and Christakos (1995) found men were far more likely to murder their partners when they threatened or attempted to leave. Estrangement or leaving the relationship was a primary or secondary causative factor in 13% of male versus 4% of female spouse offenders, 5% of male versus 3% of female common-law offenders, and 9% of male versus 1% of female boyfriend/girlfriend offenders. Examining Canadian national homicide data, women who were separated from their partners were 26 times more likely than married women (relative to the number of couples in the population) to be killed by a spouse (79 per 1 million separated couples versus 3 per 1 million married couples). As well, the risk of homicide upon separation is much higher for women than men.

The male proprietary theory suggests marital separation results in an increase in the risk of spousal homicide because it challenges "male proprietariness". Historically, laws and societal pressures prevented women from leaving their husbands (DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997), however, the laws differ today, leaving husbands to rely on their own method of social control (i.e., violence). Theoretically, the use of violence would escalate when the woman leaves her husband, because separation would be a direct challenge to male partners who believe they "own" their wives/cohabiting partners.

Suicide and Multiple-Victim Homicide

Familicide (killing of both the wife and minor children) is believed to be a dramatic reflection of men's proprietary attitudes towards women and their reproductive capacities. In some cases, men will kill their wives and children, followed by a suicidal act (Crittenden & Crain, 1990; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Johnson & Chisholm, 1989). In Canada, 10 of the 23 familicides between 1974 and 1983 were followed immediately by suicide. Daly and Wilson (1988) speculate that men who are considering suicide may kill their wives and

children due to feelings of ownership and control, believing that his family cannot survive without him. Daly and Wilson argue that an unplanned suicide out of remorse appears to be an extremely rare act, and often the killer will leave instructions, notes, or other evidence that the murder-suicide was planned. Murder of multiple victims (the female partner and her lover, or the female partner and their children), is almost exclusively a male activity and is also consistent with the theory. A man's feelings of possessiveness and control are thought to extend to the children, feelings of jealousy towards men believed to be sexual rivals, or other people trying to protect the woman, and he would kill these individuals as well as the woman.

Critiques of the Male Proprietariness Theory

Despite the value of this theory when conceptualizing homicide by male intimate partners, there are a number of constraints. One difficulty in interpreting the research according to the male proprietariness theory results from complications associated with definitions of relevant terms. 'Proprietariness' as a motive is difficult to measure quantitatively or qualitatively and whether 'jealousy' is deemed to be a motivating force depends to a great extent on the interpretation of the police investigators or the researcher. Interestingly, some important aspects of the theory are not well explained by the research. For example, the research does not directly examine whether women who have borne their partners' children are at less risk of homicide than childless women or women with children from a previous partner.

Other risk factors commonly occur within intimate relationships, yet the act of homicide itself remains very rare. For example, estrangement has been identified as a risk factor for homicide due to the possessiveness of the man, however, only a small proportion of women who separate from their partners are killed by them, when you consider the total number of separations that occur (Ellis & DeKeseredy, 1997). For example, in 1990, there were 78 000 divorces in Ontario (Ellis, 1994), yet between 1974 and 1992 in Canada, there were only 1435 intimate femicides. The number of wives divorced in a single year is 55 times greater than the number of wives murdered by their partners over a 19-year period, indicating that the vast majority of wives separated from their partners are not murdered by them. The wife may be killed following separation not as a result of the separation, but as a result of an increase in the severity of marital conflict. Specifically, if women leave assaultive husbands when the frequency and severity of the assaults become intolerably dangerous, it is not surprising that they are at higher risk following separation.

Therefore, in order to more effectively determine risk, it may be more useful to conceptualize male proprietariness differently. First, male intimate partners may be located along a continuum of proprietariness, as there is a difference in the frequency and severity of violence men display towards their partners. In addition, female partners can be placed on a continuum of resistance (Bowker, 1983; DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gondolf & Fisher, 1988), such that they may involve others, decide to leave the relationship, or choose to remain in the relationship and take no form of action. These activities may well influence their partners' behaviours.

It is evident that differences in the behaviour of violent male intimate partners may be influenced by personal and situational factors. For example, there are extremely violent and dangerous sociopathic or antisocial batterers; there are those who only become violent

when abusing substances, while others have a history of criminal behaviour, and many who have no previous criminal behaviour. Gondolf and Fisher (1988) developed a typology based on these differences, and report that sociopathic or antisocial batterers are likely over represented among those who kill their estranged partners. Their violence towards their partners appears to increase over time, and since their wives/cohabiting partners are often killed within 2 to 3 months of separation, the homicide represents a continuation in their pattern of violence rather than a reaction to the separation (Polk, 1994; Wilson & Daly, 1994). Other men, who rarely or never abuse or beat their partners, may kill them and/or others as a reaction to the separation (Mahoney, 1991). It has been suggested this type of male appears to be an emotionally dependent individual who uses dependency rather than violence to control his intimate partner and prevent her from leaving him (Ellis & Kerry, 1994). He perceives separation as abandonment, and may be at risk to commit multiple killings (i.e., femicide and suicide or femicide, homicide, and suicide).

Polk (1994) argues there are some cases where the theme surrounding the killing involves control mixed with severe depression. Provocation may be a result of physical deterioration in older couples and economic breakdown in the case of younger males. Polk argues that in depression-homicide-suicide cases, there is evidence of control (e.g., their wives are viewed as possessions they must take with them) but no evidence of jealousy per se. In these cases, the primary goal of the husband is self-destruction, while in cases where sexual jealousy prevails, the primary goal is the destruction of the woman. Thus, there are cases where masculine control is the main theme, excluding jealousy and possessiveness. The wife may be viewed as a disposable possession; in other situations, it may be more difficult to determine the man's motivation. Even in these cases, the violence is used for the purpose of control and the death is of a female sexual intimate.

The male proprietariness theory is an evolutionary theory, and often fails to implicate factors such as personality, stressful life events, family background, and social support. As mentioned earlier, spousal homicide is only the tip of the iceberg; many women are physically and emotionally abused, but not killed, by their spouses. It is apparent that many factors interact to build up to the act of homicide by men. For example, it appears experiences of childhood abuse and insecure attachments (Chimbos, 1978; Showalter et al., 1980) are common amongst men who kill their intimate partners, yet factors such as these are not examined in the majority of this body of research.

Nevertheless, the male proprietariness theory offers valuable insights into the phenomenon of men killing their intimate partners. The husband's accusing the wife of sexual infidelity, by her unilateral decision to terminate the relationship, or by a more generalized inability to control her, evidently precipitates a large majority of femicide cases. In addition, Daly and Wilson (1988) acknowledge that homicide is counterproductive and costly to men (i.e., the genetic loss of depriving the children of their mother, imprisonment, etc.), so it appears that men who actually kill their wives have overstepped the bounds of utility and reacted passionately to a serious conflict.

Self-Defense Theory

The majority of literature regarding women's use of violence over the past 15 years has been concerned with women in abusive relationships who kill their abusers; thus, women's use of violence has often been viewed as a response to an abusive situation or past abusive experiences (Shaw & Dubois, 1995). By the 1980's, it was widely accepted

that women who killed their male partners were likely to have been battered women whose experiences of abuse resulted in the killing (Bannister, 1991; Block, 1990; Browne, 1987). In order to begin to understand the experience of the majority of women who use lethal violence against their partners, it is critical to develop some comprehension of the consequences of intimate violence against women. Goetting (1999) highlights the idea that battering is used to dominate and control the woman, leaving her trapped in an intimate relationship which generally intensifies in violence, receiving little to no support from society, the criminal justice system, the church, social services, medical institutions, the family, and the community. Thus, battering is supported by a patriarchal system that reflects male ownership, and in this system women are at times viewed as more dangerous than men, or portrayed as bringing the problems of violence upon themselves. Women of other racial backgrounds (e.g., black women) often experience these stereotypes to a greater degree and are often labeled as ‘aggressors’. Hooks (1984) points out that African American women were given inferior status and have an historical legacy of slavery and oppression. Thus, the social context surrounding their experiences, particularly in intimate relationships, has a different flavor and needs to be taken into account.

Accordingly, lethal violent offending by women may best be seen as a function of being subordinate in a patriarchal society. Thus, these women are responding as victims of violence, who kill to protect themselves from death at the hands of their partner. Battered woman syndrome, first described by Lenore Walker (1979), has been offered as one explanation as to the prevalence of females involved in intimate homicides. Walker suggests that women experience learned helplessness as a result of feeling “trapped” in a relationship where physical and emotional violence is directed towards them. Women in this situation perceive that they cannot leave, due to financial dependence or fear of harm. Walker (1979) points to the cyclical nature of the battering behavior, and points out that for many of these women, the experience of battering may be ‘normal’, especially if they were raised in a violent household. She also emphasizes the demoralization, hopelessness, guilt, and traditional beliefs these women often possess.

As a result, social scientists argue that female-perpetrated homicides are a result of women’s inability to protect themselves from their male partners’ aggression (Browne, 1987). According to this theory, battered women who kill do so in response to an attack on themselves or following a threat from the abuser to harm another, usually a child. These women believe it is impossible to break free from the violent relationship (Radford, 1994). In fact, battered women often make numerous unsuccessful attempts to obtain outside intervention before committing spousal homicide (Sherman & Berk, 1984). Thus, in considering the literature available regarding women who have killed, we must remind ourselves of the acute and intense feelings of entrapment these women experience. Even in situations where other factors are evident (substance abuse, previous criminal background, previous aggressive actions, infidelity), the experience of both proximal and/or distal violence at the hands of her partner is generally always present (Websdale, 1999).

Research in Support of the Self-Defense Theory

Since the 1980’s, there has been an increase in the number of studies on homicide by women, most of them American (Browne, 1987; Campbell, 1992). These studies have departed from the historical reliance on sexual stereotypes or the view of women as mentally unstable or pathological. Current studies situate female-initiated intimate

homicides in the context of their histories of abuse within the family, and as acts of self-defense based on the belief that their lives were in danger. Research suggests that male victims often initiate the homicidal act with threats of or actual physical violence (Chimbos, 1978; Jurik & Winn, 1990; Wilbanks, 1983; Wolfgang, 1958).

Browne (1987) notes that although there exists more of a focus on violence within families and books documenting the experiences of the 'battered woman', little is known about the progression of violence, or those cases that result in death. Women generally do not kill, but when they do, it is often in their own defense. A review of police records on spousal homicides in Canada found that the majority of women who killed their partners were beaten by them (Chimbos, 1978). Similarly, Totman (1978), studying women in a California State Prison, reported that of 30 women who had killed their partners, 29 had been abused by them. In Campbell's (1992) sample of female-perpetrated homicides where the victim was a current or estranged husband or boyfriend, male victims had beaten their partners in 79% of the cases. In her sample, only 3 women had killed their partners without a history of being battered and without their partners precipitating the killing through violence or the threat of violence. Grant (1995) interviewed 13 women, ranging in age from 26 to 65 years of age who were convicted for the manslaughter of their intimate partners. Grant attempted to determine the women's perceptions of their experiences with their partners that resulted in either the death or serious injury of that person. The women described the killing as trying to stop the violence against them. Many of the women were threatened with their own death at the time of the killing and believed their own death was inevitable. Polk (1994) examined 12 case studies and concluded that in 8 of the 12 cases, women had killed their sexual partners in response to the violence of the man. In only two cases was the killing in response to the threat of the man leaving, and no cases resulted out of jealousy on the part of the woman. These findings are supported by other researchers (Browne, 1987; Daly & Wilson, 1988; Wilbanks, 1983).

Browne (1987) compared 42 battered women who were charged with killing their partners with 205 battered women who had not, in order to determine risk factors. She used a semi structured questionnaire and examined police reports, hospital records, and witness statements in order to gather data. She found few differences between the two groups of women; instead, the main differences were among the partners of these women. Women in the homicide group were subjected to frequent and injurious attacks from partners who were likely drinking heavily, using drugs, sexually assaulting them, and threatening murder.

Browne (1986) found that alcohol and drug use were much higher among partners of battered women imprisoned for murdering or attempting to murder them than among partners of a comparison group of battered women. It has been suggested that in some situations involving alcohol, the woman killed her partner in an attempt to protect herself or her children from his violent behaviour. Other studies suggest that substance use is common amongst both partners. From limited data, Goetting (1987) determined that at least 37.5% of the women and 44.6% of their husbands had been drinking prior to the homicide. Blount, Silverman, Sellers, and Seese (1994) interviewed 42 incarcerated women with extensive abuse histories who had killed their intimate partners and 59 women who were in shelters for battered women. Alcohol and drug use distinguished between the intimate homicide and shelter groups; both the partner's alcohol use and the

women's alcohol use were significantly higher among the intimate homicide group. Again, one needs to consider the different subcultures present in substance abuse between men and women. Women are frequently judged very differently when addicted, and those addicted to drugs such as cocaine are frequently degraded and forced to turn to prostitution to support their habit. Verbal and physical abuse is common experiences and their lifestyle does not support a loving, caring relationship.

O'Keefe (1997) compared battered women incarcerated for killing or seriously wounding their abusers with battered women incarcerated for other offenses. O'Keefe's sample consisted of 50 women convicted of homicide or assault, and 26 women convicted of nonviolent crimes, incarcerated in California Correctional Institutions. Her sample was non-random, and the data suffered from self-report and memory recall biases. Nevertheless, her findings supported existing literature. Many similarities existed between the two groups; the women reported sustaining serious physical injuries, and nearly 50% reported experiencing severe abuse during childhood. Several factors were found to differentiate the two groups: battered women who killed or seriously assaulted their partners tended to be older, to have been in the relationship longer, and experienced more frequent, severe beating, and a longer duration of violence. They were also more likely to believe their lives were in danger. Eighty percent of women who killed or assaulted their partners did not have a prior criminal record.

Critiques of the Self-Defense Theory

A general difficulty in examining intimate partner homicide perpetrated by women is the relative rarity of the act. Thus, samples are often small and not necessarily representative, and tend to involve women who have been identified as 'battered' by their partners. The importance of factors such as culture, life stressors, and early childhood experiences is often not explored extensively, but should not be underestimated. Roberts (1996) conducted in-depth interviews with 105 incarcerated battered women who had killed their partners compared with 105 non-violent battered women in the community. Specifically, he examined demographic and background variables, psychosocial factors, critical incidents during childhood, battering incidents, and coping methods. He found that the majority of battered women who had killed their abusive partners were more likely to have: been sexually assaulted during childhood, dropped out of high school, had an erratic work history, cohabited with their partner prior to marriage, experienced a drug problem, attempted suicide, and access to their partners' guns. Thus, it may be the case that other factors influence the homicide, or interact with the battering incidents to result in the homicide.

Implications

Prevention and Intervention

Intimate homicide appears to result most often from the difficulties (i.e., physical abuse, history of violent interactions) associated with extreme conflict in intimate relationships. In fact, homicide between partners tends to be preceded by a domestic conflict, regardless of whether the victim is the man or the woman (Jurik & Winn, 1990). Thus, attempts to reduce the amount of interpersonal violence and increase the problem-solving skills and coping mechanisms within these unions may help reduce the likelihood they will end in a homicide. Since unequal power relations within intimate relationships encourage abuse and increase the risk of homicide, men need to be challenged with

regards to their attitudes towards their intimate relationships, particularly feelings of possessiveness and the need to control the intimate partner. Sublethal abuse and threats to kill need to be taken seriously, as these actions may elevate over time and result in a homicide. Intervention needs to begin early, particularly in homes where violence is observed by the children. In order to be effective, this intervention needs to occur at the individual level (for example, anger management programs, family violence programs, assertiveness training, psychotherapy) and at a societal level (changing laws, changing attitudes about the acceptance of aggression in males, challenging our views about the private nature of family life, etc.).

Physical abuse appears to play a role in both homicides by men and by women, with the abuse being perpetrated by the men. Violent behaviour within an intimate relationship increases the risk of death due to violence; history of violence within the home is strongly associated with residential homicide (Kellerman et al., 1993). The limited evidence regarding female offenders suggests that women are far more likely to kill their partners if their partners behave violently towards them. In fact, when a woman kills her batterer, the abuse almost always will have escalated both in frequency and intensity in the period preceding the killing (Browne, 1987; Rosen, 1993). Women who are repeatedly victimized are at risk of becoming either an offender or a victim of homicide, therefore intervention and assistance must be available for these women, particularly if they decide to terminate the relationship. Since women who choose to leave their partners are at such great risk for being killed, safe refuges and other means of protection (such as anti-stalking laws) must be available for these women. Law enforcement officials must take seriously the risk that battered women face, particularly in the first several months post-separation.

Women who kill their partners often lack resources and access to legal responses (Black, 1983; Williams & Fleming, 1987), and their homicidal action is viewed as a form of extralegal social control or means of self-preservation. The legal system must take further action to protect women who are abused by their partners. More recently, Schneider (2000) argued that 'battered woman syndrome' serves to increase the stereotypes and myths concerning the characteristics of battered women, fostering the view that she is dependent, passive and helpless. Legally, there exists an equal rights problem for battered women who kill; women are frequently pathologized and there have been little changes among the media, legal scholars, lawyers, and judges. Schneider argues that these misconceptions have led to considerable difficulties for women. Recognizing the social context is the first step, since those who work to make changes for women who face domestic violence must understand things from their perspective. Resistance on the part of the legal system can take many forms, including the refusal to hear the experiences of the woman and stereotyping them. Educating both the legal system and the general public can only serve to increase their understanding and aid in the quest to equality.

On a positive note, legal and social systems do appear to be changing, which may explain the overall reduction in intimate homicides over the past several decades. Browne and Williams (1989) assessed the relationship between the availability of resources and domestic violence legislation for women at risk and rates of female-perpetrated partner murder and non-negligent manslaughter. They found a negative correlation between the presence of both domestic violence legislation and other resources for battered women,

and the rate of homicide perpetrated by female intimate partners. This suggests that offering women protection and assistance may help them find alternatives to reacting with violence. Overall, these changes rely on substantial changes in the way society views intimate violence. Considering the numerous problems faced by women attempting to leave the relationship (loneliness, lower pay, weak child support, lack of affordable health care, no support for single mothers and their children, to name a few). Coupled with the frequent intensification of battering (e.g., stalking, harassment, and an increase in violence when she leaves), it is no surprise that women feel they have no choice but to remain in an abusive relationship (Davies et al., 1998; Straton, 1994; Wilson & Daly, 1993). Therefore, the damaging, patriarchal attitudes that dominate the major institutions and systems in society must change, if we are to make any progress whatsoever.

Alcohol use appears to be a major contributing factor to homicide (Blount et al., 1994; Browne, 1987; Goetting, 1987). Miller, Downs, and Gondoli (1989) found more severe abuse by their partners reported by a group of alcoholic women compared to nonalcoholic women, and they suggested that alcohol may be used as a coping mechanism by women in abusive relationship. It appears that both the woman's and man's drinking must be assessed, since evidence suggests that in the case where a spousal homicide occurs, both partners evidenced heavy use of alcohol. Thus, substance abuse treatment should be a significant part of any program for battered women or men who batter (Blount et al., 1994). Attitudes toward women who experience problems with substances must be changed, if any progress is to be made.

The problem of domestic violence is pervasive, and far more complex than it may appear on the surface. In order to generate changes, we must get to the root of the problem; the acceptability of violence, attitudes toward men and women, particularly men and women in abusive relationships, and a society where almost every major institution accepts or ignores the problems of gender inequality. We need to accept men's vulnerabilities and make it acceptable for them to express their feelings in an appropriate manner. Self-acceptance, equality, and respect are critical. As well, society needs to be less tolerant of violence of any kind, and realistic views of relationships need to be adopted.

Conclusions

The Role of Gender

Although both male and female intimate partners kill as a result of the breakdown of intimacy, different motivations promote the homicide. Evidence from various sources, such as police files, psychiatric reports, case law, and interview studies from different countries, clearly suggests that differences exist among women and men involved in intimate relationships who kill their partners. Men are predominantly the offenders and women are much more likely to be the victims. In cases where women are the victims, researchers have found that jealousy, separation or the threat of separation, were the major precipitating factors, particularly when the victims were young women (Polk & Ranson, 1991; Wallace, 1986). The dominant theme among cases where men kill their intimate partners appears to be possessiveness; the husband accusing the wife of sexual infidelity, by her decision to end the relationship, and/or by his desire to control her, precipitates a large majority of wife killings. When the female victim is older, sexual jealousy is generally not a strong motive; rather, the woman is viewed as property to be

taken in death. In the case of women killing their partners, the victims tend to initiate the violence during the homicide altercation, suggesting the women killed in self-defense (Jurik & Winn, 1990). Battered women have little reason to believe the criminal justice system will protect them. The law and the patriarchal hierarchy have legitimized wife beating and control, resulting in unequal power relationships between men and women.

It appears that the theories proposed to explain spousal homicide do have value, despite their limitations. Various disciplines (sociologists, psychologists, biologists, criminologists) have developed different interpretations for violent behaviour, and the importance of social context, biology, and psychological factors have been incorporated into the research and theories surrounding intimate homicide. According to the respective theories, men and women's attitudes within the relationship differ; yet, it is the dynamics of these relationships that influences the act of homicide. The decline of spousal homicide rates from 1996 to 1998 in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2000) may primarily be the result of reduced exposure to abusive or violent relationships as a consequence of the changing living arrangements of men and women, improvements in the economic status of women, and increases in the availability of domestic violence shelters. Thus, the value of these theories lies in signaling us to the necessity of making changes, both at an individual and societal level.

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