Controversy, Constraints, and Context: Understanding Family Violence Through Family Systems Theory

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Abstract:
This article discusses the controversies surrounding the use of family systems theory as a framework for understanding family violence. The author examines potential implications for the exclusion of family systems approaches in the research and treatment of family violence. In addition, the author describes several opportunities that may arise through the application of family systems theory to family violence for theory, practice, and research.
Keywords: family violence; family systems theory; domestic violence

Article:

> *Hurt people hurt people.*
> —Wilson (2001)

Clients who present with family violence issues bring forth a number of challenges for family counselors. These challenges may include client safety, mandated reporting, court-referred clients, and counter transference. Beyond these practical challenges lies an even greater theoretical dilemma: How can marriage and family counselors adequately understand the intense dynamics involved in violent family relationships?

Scholars have proposed various theories to explain family violence. For example, Wallace (2005) reviews such theories as the psychopathology theory, social learning theory, the frustration-aggression theory, the patriarchy theory, and family systems theory. Of these theories, family systems theory—which serves as the theoretical foundation for the field of marriage and family counseling (Becvar & Becvar, 2000; Guttman, 1991; Nichols & Schwartz, 2005)—has been among the most controversial. As a result, family counselors who practice from a family systems theoretical framework have been left to ponder the usefulness of their epistemology for working with family violence issues. Systemic counselors must consider the potential implications of such theoretical assumptions as the functionality of symptoms and circular causality (Guttman, 1991; Nichols & Schwartz, 2005) as they apply to family violence. For example, does family systems theory hold an abused person to be an equal contributor to the violent relationship processes? What role does an understanding of family dynamics play in the treatment of victims and victimizers in families? And are violent behaviors not "bad" but "functional" within the context of the relationship system?

The purpose of this article is to explore the controversies surrounding a family systems approach to understanding family violence. This article addresses the potential constraints that the exclusion of systemic approaches places on the effectiveness of treatment and intervention strategies in the area of family violence. Finally, the potential contributions that family systems theory can make toward improving theoretical development, clinical practice, and research in the area of family violence are examined. A secondary purpose of this article is to stimulate thought, discussion, and debate to ultimately improve the services available to those families whose lives are disrupted by violence.

THE CONTROVERSY

Family systems theory is based on several basic assumptions about relationship processes within families (Guttman, 1991; Nichols & Schwartz, 2005). First, family systems theory holds that individuals within families are intricately connected to one another and that experiences in one part of the system affect all other parts of the system as well. Family systems theorists pay particular attention to the reciprocal influences on an individual's behavior. Circular causality, an important construct within family systems theory, holds that all effects are the result of multiple causes, and effects in turn influence the causal pathways. Additional important theoretical assumptions include the importance of intergenerational family processes, the significance of all forms of communication within families, and the regulation of family structures through explicit and implicit rules, information, and feedback. In addition, family systems theory avoids labeling behaviors as good or bad but rather focuses on examining the function that a behavior plays within a system.

Feminist scholars have provided the most vocal critique of family systems theory, particularly as it applies to family violence (Avis, 1988; Bograd, 1986, 1992; Libow, 1985). The feminist critique of family systems theory highlights several important considerations, including the importance of power dynamics within families (Bograd, 1986; Libow, 1985) and the repercussions of taking a nonblaming, neutral stance toward violent behavior (Avis, 1988; Bograd, 1992; Siegenthaler & Boss, 1998). Critics have argued that a failure to address power dynamics contributes to an assumption that each individual within a violent family system shares equal responsibility and power (Babcock & La Taillade, 2000; Penfold, 1989). In addition, critics contend that a focus on the interactional processes within violent families implicitly blames the abused person for the abuser's violent behavior (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1995). The feminist critique also holds that insight-based approaches (such as family systems theory) to treating perpetrators of family violence contribute to further excuses for the violent behavior and may provide the perpetrator with additional information to use to manipulate the victim (Adams, 1988; Saunders, 2001).

This critique has led to several reservations regarding the appropriateness of family systems theory for treating family violence, particularly for batterer intervention programs (Rotter & Houston, 1999). Based on this critique, family systems theory has been banned by several state laws that regulate batterer intervention programs (Saunders, 2001). For example, the North Carolina Administrative Code (2004; 01 NCAC 17.0708 a.3) states, "The following methods shall not be used by abuser treatment programs ... any theoretical approaches that treat the violence as a mutual process." As another example, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (1995) lists as inappropriate methods "systems theory approaches which treat the violence as a mutually circular process, blaming the victim" (p. 11). In the State of Michigan (1998), the Batterer Intervention Standards indicates that a systemic approach to batterer intervention programs is a "potentially harmful technique" (p. 11) that has "been criticized for contributing to a belief in victim responsibility for violence" (p. 12). It is important to note that not all states mandate that all programs must follow these guidelines (Saunders, 2001). However, in many states in which guidelines exist, programs must meet these regulations to be recognized by the state (i.e., to be acceptable programs within the judicial system; Saunders, 200 1). Therefore, practitioners who provide such programs must often modify their programs to meet state requirements to receive adequate funding and referral bases to support their programs.

These standards reflect an important concern for the safety and well-being of domestic violence victims. However, this type of regulation of batterer intervention programs has formalized the feminist critique of family systems theory in a manner that potentially impedes the practice of marriage and family counselors. Although the concerns expressed by critics of family systems theory are very important, they are based primarily on a philosophical argument rather than on empirical facts (Rosenbaum, 1988). The next section describes the potential constraints that arise from excluding family systems theory from the realms of theory, practice, and research in the area of family violence.

THE CONSTRAINTS

To date, there is no conclusive evidence that family systems theory approaches to treating family violence issues either are or are not effective. However, marriage and family counselors' ability as a profession to

develop this evidence is currently limited by state regulations and the conventional wisdom that disallows the application of family systems theory to practice and research in the area of family violence. This section presents three potential problems that may arise if family systems theory is continuously omitted from the cultural discourse surrounding family violence. These problems include hindrance of the scientific process in family violence research, limitations of treatment effectiveness, and inadequate attention to the intergenerational transmission of violence.

Hindrance of the Scientific Process

Marriage and family counselors have an ethical obligation to provide services that are known to be effective with specific presenting problems and client populations (American Counseling Association, 2005, section C, Introduction). Methodologically strong empirical outcome studies are perhaps the most effective approach for determining the effectiveness and efficacy of various treatment approaches. The scientific process relies on the rigorous testing of hypotheses through various empirical research methodologies to create new knowledge about a particular topic. According to Neil Jacobson (1994), "The goal of basic research on wife abuse must be controlled, systematic, and dispassionate observation" (p. 83). Regulations—such as the banning of family systems approaches to batterer intervention programs—may inadvertently hinder the scientific process by rendering certain hypotheses unable to be tested. In this case, it may not be possible for researchers to examine the question of whether systemic approaches are effective for treating family violence because of regulations that preclude the utilization of such approaches. Even in states in which systemic approaches are not outlawed, researchers may be inhibited from conducting research on their effectiveness because of limited funding opportunities and resistance from referral sources.

It is particularly important for ideas that limit or expand treatment options and affect public policies to be subjected to the empirical research process. Certainly, research in this area should be conducted with strict adherence to ethical, legal, and safety guidelines (Rosenbaum, 1988). However, the greatest imperative is currently for systemic approaches to become available for public evaluation, debate, and scrutiny. It is impossible to predict whether the scientific process would reveal systemic approaches to treating family violence to be effective or ineffective. Nonetheless, the scientific evaluation of these approaches stands to make an important contribution to the conceptualization and treatment of family violence.

Limitations of Treatment Effectiveness

At this point in time, there is no conclusive evidence that would allow a definitive answer to the question, "Are family systems theory approaches to treating family violence effective?" (Rotter & Houston, 1999). If family systems-based approaches are not effective, then the current exclusion of such practices is appropriate. However, if family systems-based approaches could be effective, then the exclusion of such practices may mean that effective treatment strategies are being withheld. This section outlines some of the potential implications of the exclusion of family systems theory from the realm of family violence for the treatment of both perpetrators and victims of domestic violence.

Regarding the treatment of perpetrators, treatment approaches that fail to account for the systemic context may limit clients to first-order, rather than second-order, change. Within family systems theory, first-order change is a surface-level change in which some behavior may change but the underlying systemic dynamics remain the same (Guttman, 1991; Nichols & Schwartz, 2005). Applied to domestic violence, an example of a first-order change would be a situation in which an abusive male develops new communication skills, but he continues to believe that he has the power to make all decisions for his female partner. Therefore, he may use different communication strategies to talk to his partner, but the skewed structure of their relationship remains the same. In contrast, a second-order change involves a deeper change in the underlying structure of a family relationship (Guttman, 1991; Nichols & Schwartz, 2005). A second-order change for the above example would involve the male and his partner developing a relationship in which both partners are mutually respected and share in decision-making processes.

Research on the effectiveness of existing batterer intervention programs is limited (Rosenbaum & Leisring, 2001; Saunders, 2001). Research has not yet determined that any one approach to batterer intervention programs is consistently more effective than are other approaches (Saunders, 2001). There is a wide variation among batterer intervention programs (Rosenbaum & Leisring, 2001), although certain promising practices exist, such as the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, or the "Duluth Model" (Minnesota Program Development, Inc., 2005; Rosenbaum & Leisring, 2001). The importance of treatment effectiveness cannot be understated. As Stuart (2005) wrote, "Failed intervention may be more harmful than none because treatment creates a false sense of security that exposes abuse victims to continued risk" (p. 254). Recent research has also highlighted a potential need for different types of intervention based on different typologies of batterers (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Saunders, 200 1; Stuart, 2005). It appears from the research that treatment programs may differ in their effectiveness based on certain personal characteristics of the participants (Saunders, 2001). These findings suggest that systemic approaches may be appropriate for some domestic violence perpetrators yet per-haps not appropriate for others.

Regarding the treatment of victims of domestic violence, failure to address an abused person's role within the relationship can prevent an important opportunity for empowerment. Although a person is never responsible for being abused, recognition that the abused person had opportunities to make different choices can lead to a realization that violent situations and experiences may be preventable in the future. For example, the author recently observed a support group for battered women. One of the women in the group made a statement similar to the following:

> I used to date this guy who was really sweet, and he treated me really well. He never hit me and never said a bad thing to me. But no, I didn't want him. I'd much rather go with the jerk who hits me and says mean things to me.

This woman may benefit from an examination of the choices she makes about intimate partners, which may lead her to make changes in her life that would allow her to seek out healthier relationships. Without a consideration of her role in relationships, she may go on to return to one violent relationship after another. In the area of treating victims of domestic violence, family counselors must carefully consider the language they use for communicating with both the victims themselves and with professionals with other theoretical orientations. Language that is laden with words that imply or attribute blame to the abused person is disempowering. However, many treatment approaches for working with domestic violence victims already carry an implicit assumption that an abused person can make changes to promote safety and develop healthy relationships. For example, treatment approaches may include a discussion of assertiveness training, safety planning, and self-esteem-building exercises (Bennett, Riger, Schewe, Howard, & Wasco, 2004), all of which are changes the abused person can make to enhance her or his personal safety and well-being (although the extent to which these changes promote physical safety may be limited by the lethality of the abusive person).

Systemic counselors must carefully consider how to appropriately help victims of domestic violence evaluate their choices, behaviors, and roles in their relationships. Such an evaluation should be conducted in the context of support and empowerment, based on the assumption that an individual who has been abused can make changes to promote personal strengths and healthy relationships. The opposite assumption, that there is nothing an abused person can do to prevent another violent relationship from developing, potentially leads to hopelessness and disempowerment.

The Intergenerational Transmission of Violence

A substantial amount of research exists that supports the intergenerational transmission of violence, or the finding that violent behaviors tend to become repeating patterns across generations in families (Avakame, 1998; Ehrensaft, Cohen, & Brown, 2003; Kwong, Bartholomew, & Henderson, 2003; Rosen, Bartle-Haring, & Stith, 2001). Researchers have established that violent behaviors are often learned within the family of origin, and then these behaviors reoccur as individuals become adults and enter intimate relationships (Bevan & Higgins, 2002; Markowitz, 2001). For example, in a study of 51 gay, HIV-positive males, Craft and Serovich (2005)

found a positive correlation between witnessing mother-to-father domestic violence in one's family of origin and being either a victim or perpetrator of violence in one's intimate adult relationships. Craft and Serovich also found a positive correlation between being a child victim of parental abuse and being either a victim or perpetrator of violence in one's intimate adult relationships. In another study, Markowitz (2001) found that adults who had experienced family violence as children held more positive attitudes toward violence in adult intimate relationships.

To ignore the intergenerational processes that contribute to family violence is to disregard well-documented empirical findings and the personal experiences of victimization among many individuals who demonstrate violent behaviors in their family relationships. Family systems theory does not regard such past experiences of victimization as excuses but rather as past influences on current behavior. Within family systems theory, each individual maintains responsibility for her or his actions within the context of systemic influences (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Current practices that ignore past histories of victimization may prohibit valuable information from being discussed in the treatment of violent family members. Therefore, a need exists for the development of practices that can both account for these systemic influences and concurrently prioritize the acceptance of personal responsibility for violent behavior.

CONTEXTUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR THEORY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

Opportunities are available for scholars, practitioners, and researchers to stimulate advancements in the field through further consideration of the contextual influences on family violence. This section outlines several current needs and opportunities for advancing the theory, practice, and research of family counseling in the area of family violence.

Opportunities for Theory

Scholars who study families would benefit from further consideration of the application of family systems theory to family violence issues. The feminist critique has highlighted some significant shortcomings of family systems theory, most notably in the area of power and control in families and the influence of the larger social context on family relationships. Although some scholars have attempted to counter these criticisms (Flemons, 1989; Horne & Hicks, 2002), further theoretical refinement is needed to further elucidate the theoretical assumptions that fall short in their explanations of family violence.

A postmodern epistemology may offer some benefits to scholars in this area. Within the postmodern epistemology, many truths can coexist (Gergen, 2001). Therefore, both of the following ideas can be fully true: an abusive person can be held entirely responsible for her or his violent behaviors and that person's behaviors can be influenced by past and present family relationship processes and experiences. Thus, the abusive person is at the same time personally accountable and a product of her or his environment (Gutsche & Murray, 1991).

Opportunities for Practice

At the present time, practitioners who embrace family systems theory are left to their own devices to determine how to reconcile the controversial issues described earlier. For many practitioners, this may mean that they must operate on two different levels: they conceptualize their clients' cases systemically, but they use other approaches (e.g., anger management, conflict resolution, and communication skills training) in practice. Other practitioners may choose to leave family systems theory behind entirely when working with family violence issues.

Rotter and Houston (1999) asserted, based on their review of the literature on family violence treatment, that there is some evidence that family system-focused approaches to treating family violence can be effective, especially when used along with other treatment approaches. Two promising practices provide models of family systems theory-based approaches to treating domestic violence. First, Stith et al. (Stith, Rosen, & McCollum, 2002; Stith, Rosen, McCollum, & Thomsen, 2004) have developed a manualized couples treatment program for domestic violence. In this program, which is based on the solution-focused approach, conjoint couples groups are conducted following the male partner's successful completion of a batterer intervention program. In an

experimental outcome study of this program, Stith and colleagues (2004) produced preliminary findings that indicate that the approach is effective in reducing domestic violence for the participating couples. Second, the Family Safety Model was developed in Australia by Shaw, Bouris, and Pye (1996). This model involves a multilateral approach that includes a voluntary batterer intervention program, a support group for victims, couples assessment or therapy, and services for the children involved. The Family Safety Model pays significant attention to the impact of the violence on the entire family system.

Systemic counselors are encouraged to consider how they can most effectively and responsibly treat family violence issues while remaining true to their theoretical orientation. The safety of the abused person is the primary goal of nearly all batterer intervention programs (Saunders, 2001), and systemic counselors should consider the safety implications of any interventions they use. Counselors are ethically and legally bound to practice within the guidelines of all relevant state regulations. When permissible within these guidelines, however, systemic counselors can use family systems interventions (e.g., constructing a genogram and family sculpting) in an effort to promote second-order change. Practitioners also can benefit from developing advocacy skills that they can use to inform other practitioners, lawmakers, and victim's advocates of the skills and expertise that marriage and family counselors can bring to the development of programs and policies in the area of family violence.

Opportunities for Research
The application of a family systems theory framework for understanding the dynamics of family violence raises more questions than answers. Accordingly, many important research questions follow from the ideas contained in this article. These questions include the following: (a) In what circumstances could a systemic approach to treating family violence be appropriate? (b) What are the most appropriate and effective strategies for applying systemic principles to practice in the treatment of family violence issues? (c) For which types of batterers would a systemic treatment approach be effective? (d) Do abusive persons who are treated through a systemic approach use the self-knowledge they gain through this approach to create excuses for their violence or to manipulate their partners? (e) Could batterers develop greater empathy for their partners through a systemic treatment approach? (f) Do abused persons feel blamed by learning family systems theory? (g) Is it possible for batterers to believe concurrently that they are fully responsible for their violent behaviors and that they have been influenced by their past and present relationship experiences?

One of the most important challenges researchers in this area face is how to conduct research that is methodologically sound, ethical, legal, and safe for all involved parties (Rosenbaum, 1988). Researchers who study the application of family systems theory to family violence treatment must pay careful attention to ensure the safety of the participants and nonparticipating family members. Researchers are advised to include multiple safeguards within their studies as appropriate. These safeguards may include security personnel, the availability of crisis intervention counselors, multiple forms of participant monitoring (e.g., self-report, observation, and law enforcement), lethality assessments, adequate participant screening guidelines, and a comprehensive informed consent explaining the duty to warn. Many important research questions in this area remain unanswered. Researchers must move forward cautiously and responsibly to develop new knowledge that will guide further theoretical development, practice, and research in the area of family violence.

CONCLUSION
This article is not intended to provide any definitive answers regarding the controversial issues discussed earlier. Such definitive answers are not available at the present time. Rather, this article presented an overview of the controversial dilemmas that marriage and family counselors confront when applying family systems theory to family violence issues. Several important concerns have led to formalized restrictions on the use of family systems theory for treating family violence issues in many states. This article discussed the potential constraints that stem from these formalized restrictions, including the impact on family counselors who work in this area. Some of the challenges that lie ahead for scholars, practitioners, and researchers who consider the contextual influences on violent behavior in families were also discussed. As advancements are made in the application of family systems theory to family violence, it is likely that even more questions and controversies

will arise. Therefore, it is important for all who consider these challenges to remain focused on the ultimate goal: to improve prevention and treatment strategies for families whose lives have been touched by violence. In so doing, the field of family systems counseling can make an important contribution toward eliminating violence from the most significant of all systems: the family.

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