

DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH OF THE NONAGGRESSIVE WOMAN: A Feminist Analysis

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Abstract:

One of the most pervasive and undisputed gender stereotypes is that men are more aggressive than women. However, this stereotype has, until recently, led researchers to conclude that women are nonaggressive and, therefore, to ignore the topic of female aggression as a distinct phenomenon. The basis of the myth, factors supporting its maintenance, and theories of female aggression are examined. A feminist reinterpretation of aggression that views women's and men's aggressive behavior within social structural arrangements that create and sustain differential power relations is presented.

Article:

The evidence seems clear. Violence and aggression belong to the domain of men. Official crime statistics tell us that men are more likely to be perpetrators and victims of a wide range of criminal acts. For example, in 1990 the 50,000 women arrested for aggravated assault constituted only 13.3% of all such arrests (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1992). There are two notable exceptions to this pattern. Girls and women are by far more frequently and seriously sexually victimized. And, within intimate relationships, women and men self-report equivalent levels of verbal and physical aggression, though women are far more likely to be seriously injured or murdered by their combative partners. In spite of what appears to be unequivocal gender-related patterns of aggression, a number of questions remain. One question is whether women are really as nonaggressive as the stereotype would have us believe. The present paper examines the myth of the nonaggressive female, considers relevant research data, and provides a feminist interpretation of female aggression. For our purposes feminism is defined as ". . . a form of oppositional knowledge, aimed at disrupting accepted notions of women's behavior and women's proper place, and challenging customary categories and meanings that constitute our knowledge of gender" (Marecek & Hare-Mustin, 1990, p. 1).

In reviewing the literature for this paper, we found that aggression was defined as any behavior directed toward another person (or a person's property) with the intent to do harm, even if the aggressor was unsuccessful. The behavior could be physical or verbal, active or passive, direct or indirect (i.e., aggressor could remain anonymous), and the consequence for the target could be physical or psychological (Buss, 1961). Also, we considered offensive and defensive forms of

aggression, recognizing that in the judgment of some, defensive forms of aggression are conceptually distinct from offensive aggression. For example, Tedeschi, Smith, and Brown (1974) reported that participants were reluctant to label self-defensive behaviors as aggression. We deemed it appropriate to consider all forms of harm-doing behavior because in some cases, such as domestic violence, it is difficult to distinguish retaliative from self-defense motives (Saunders, 1988). Also, aggression was broadly defined in order to examine more fully the broad range of harm-doing behaviors available to human beings. It is our contention that female harm-doing has been ignored in part because of a narrow focus on physical forms of aggression. As will be seen, much female aggression has gone unnoticed and thus unnamed. For this reason, female physical aggression seems more unexpected, becomes labeled irrational, and is denied legitimacy.

Although the primary focus of this paper is on aggressive behavior, we also examined the literature on female criminality because sociological considerations of female aggression often occur in the context of criminality. Thus, the distinctions between violent behavior and other criminal acts, such as property crimes, are not always drawn. Some of the theories assume underlying connections between various forms of criminal behavior, usually based on stereotypical assumptions about female deviance (Chesney-Lind, 1987).

The Myth of the Nonaggressive Woman

People around the world hold a number of stereotypes regarding women and men. For example, relative to women, men are considered to be more competitive and more assertive (Block, 1976). Women, on the other hand, are rated higher than men on measures of empathy and nurturance (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983). Williams and Best (1982), in a study of sex-stereotyping in 30 nations, found aggression to be one of five traits that was more consistently associated with men than women (the other traits were dominance, autonomy, achievement, and endurance; see also Best & Williams, 1993). Although recent research has suggested that gender differences are not as great as they once appeared (Hyde & Linn, 1986) and that within-group differences may be greater than between-group differences, one stereotype about gender has remained virtually unchallenged: Men are perceived to be more aggressive than women (Egon, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1972; Geen, 1990; Gladue, 1991a, 1991b; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; McCabe & Lipscomb, 1988; Segall, 1989; Simon & Landis, 1991; Towson & Zanna, 1982; White, 1983).

Aggressiveness in men has been implicated in men's greater success in competitive environments such as sports and the work place. In contrast, nonviolence is seen as part of the passive, gentle nature of women, suiting them well for their roles as wife and mother, while rendering them unfit for competitive roles of warrior and leader (Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992; Richardson, Bernstein, & Taylor, 1979). Macaulay (1985) identified seven beliefs associated with aggression in women: women are nonaggressive, "sneaky" in their expression of aggression, unable to express anger, prone to outbursts of "fury," psychologically distressed if they are aggressive, aggressive in defense of their children, and motivated to aggress by jealousy.

These purported gender differences in aggressiveness have been reported in relation to physical and verbal aggression and apply across a range of situations and cultures (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). According to Maccoby and Jacklin (1974), this gender difference in aggression is evident

as early as age 2 and continues to be observed throughout the college years. Meta-analytic studies also have provided partial support for the observed gender differences in aggression, reporting an effect size of .50 (Hyde, 1986).

Evidence of Female Aggression

Although it is beyond the scope of the present paper to review the extant literature on gender differences in aggression, an examination of available data provides many examples of female aggression. In four comprehensive reviews of the literature, the authors in each instance argued that the conclusion that men are always more aggressive than women cannot be substantiated (Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Frodi, Macaulay, & Thome, 1977; Hyde & Linn, 1986; White, 1983). Recently, female coercion in sexual relationships (Craig, 1988) and female sexual abuse of children (Finkelhor & Russell, 1984) have been documented. Although these latter occur with considerably less frequency than male aggression against women, even the small numbers indicated that women can be aggressive. Two recent books have catalogued numerous instances of female aggression (Bjorkqvist Niemela, 1992; Haug, Benston, Brain, Mos, & Olivier, 1991). Finally, reports of female aggression in intimate relationships (to be discussed more fully in a subsequent section) also defy the stereotype of the nonaggressive woman.

The findings suggest that women have as much potential as men to be aggressive and that, given the appropriate circumstances, are as likely to display aggression as men (Frodi et al., 1977; White, 1983). For example, Towson and Zanna (1982) presented female and male research participants with vignettes describing a frustration with either a traditionally masculine or feminine task. Responses regarding the appropriateness of aggressive responses in the described situations revealed that men advocated more aggression than women in the masculine task condition, whereas gender differences disappeared in the feminine task condition. Furthermore, cultures in which aggression by women and nurturance by men are accepted show a reversal of the traditional "male as aggressor" paradigm (Mead, 1935). Although a discussion of gender differences in aggression in various animal species is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that even in this research domain the assumption of the nonaggressive woman is being questioned. For example, Cairns, Santoyo, and Holly (1994) stated, "The same genetic pathway was involved in males and females [mice]. . . . The linkage has been obscured in the literature because of the failure to employ gender-relevant assessments" (p. 9); that is, past research has not considered the contexts within which female and male animals are likely to aggress. Similarly, Hrdy and Williams (1983) have challenged the "myth of the passive female" in accounts of primate behavior.

Factors Maintaining the Myth of the Nonaggressive Woman

Lerner's (1986) historical analysis of the origins of patriarchy argues that male aggression is rooted in a warrior culture. Because of women's biological vulnerability in childbirth, more men than women occupied the role of warrior. Men assumed, with women's cooperation, the right to protect women and children from captivity by warring forces. This led to the treatment of women as possessions, with inherent weaknesses. In addition to these historical factors, a number of other factors contribute to the stereotype of the nonaggressive woman.

First, crime statistics may distort the actual incidence of female crime in the general population. In order for a crime to be included within crime statistics, there must first be not only a victim of

the crime, but also a victim who is willing to report and prosecute the crime (Morris, 1987). In the case of certain types of female aggressiveness (i.e., violence in intimate relationships), the victim (spouse or child) may not report the crime because of the lack of ability, lack of perceived seriousness, or fear of being stigmatized. Furthermore, until quite recently, female perpetrators of crime were more likely to be treated leniently by the criminal justice system. Aggressive women were labeled pathological rather than criminal. Thus, many of their crimes were unlikely to be incorporated into official crime statistics. Rather, they were more likely to be counted among the mentally ill (Anderson, 1993).

From a methodological standpoint, a number of biases in research procedures contribute to the myth of the nonaggressive woman. These biases include choice of research participants, operational definitions of aggression, and context of aggression.

Because of the notion that aggression is a predominantly male attribute, researchers have disproportionately used male as opposed to female participants in their research studies (Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992; Frodi et al., 1977; Morris, 1987; Paul & Baenninger, 1991; Yoder & Kahn, 1993). In the period 1967-1974, only 8 % of the published studies examined female aggression, whereas 54 % focused exclusively on men (Frodi et al., 1977).

Even when female aggression has been the research focus, the conceptualization and operationalization of aggression has stemmed from the "male" perspective on aggression (Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992). For example, much of the research on aggression has focused specifically on physical aggression. Typically, this work involved the teacher—learner paradigm in which the participant, acting as teacher, punishes the "learner" with electric shocks for incorrect responses (Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992). Research has shown, however, that women perceive electric shock more negatively and as a less effective deterrent than do men; thus, they are more reluctant than men to administer it (Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992; Miller, Gillen, Schlenker, & Radlove, 1974). The use of this particular paradigm "directly pits empathy against aggression, thereby facilitating sex differences. . . . Experiments which have placed empathy for the victim in direct contest with the subject's willingness to shock a victim . . . have left us with a body of literature that attests to the unaggressiveness of females" (Paul & Baenninger, 1991, pp. 404-405). Research demonstrating gender differences in aggression might be reflecting gender differences in a willingness to express physical aggression rather than the potential for aggression (Balkan, Berger, & Schmidt, 1980; Frodi et al., 1977).

A continued focus on types of aggression in which men consistently emerge as more aggressive than women fails to examine those situations in which women might aggress and the modes of aggression they might adopt. Bjorkqvist and Niemela (1992) suggested that because the majority of researchers have been male, they have chosen questions and contexts regarding aggression of greatest personal relevance. For example, women appear to be more likely than men to use indirect methods of aggression, such as sabotaging another's performance (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988). However, gender differences in indirect aggression only recently have received empirical attention. Cross-cultural research too has identified an extraordinary range of harm-doing behaviors committed by women. Burbank (1987) documented eight categories of aggressive acts in 317 societies in the Human Relations Area Files. Although her data were limited to female aggression directed

toward other adults in the context of home or neighborhood (what she labeled "domestic aggression"), a great deal of aggression was recorded. The behaviors studied included verbal, nonverbal, and physical aggression, passive-aggressive behaviors (i.e., nonperformance of duties), property damage, and locking someone out of the house. In our search of the literature, we could not find any studies that examined a comparable range of behaviors in men.

In brief, the notion of the nonaggressive woman is a myth perpetuated by sociohistorically rooted cultural attitudes and values, reified by data based on statistical and methodological biases and flaws. Although women are reported to commit fewer crimes than men, this does not imply that they are not aggressive. Rather, because of opportunities, resources, and socialization pressures, the situations in which women will display aggressive behaviors appear to be more circumscribed, limited specifically to situations in which opportunities and social sanctions for aggressive behavior are present.

Advantages of the Myth of the Nonaggressive Woman for Men

The stereotype of gender differences in aggression has been advantageous to men in maintaining a position of power over women. We argue that all men benefit from the myth, even those individual men who reject misogynist views of women, do not desire power over women, and conduct their personal lives in ways supportive of women. Being male has unavoidable advantages in this context. These can be seen in at least five ways.

First, perceived gender differences in aggression maintain women's subordination to, dependence on, and fear of men. If women are weak and nonaggressive, they must depend on men for protection and fear harm from men against whom they cannot defend themselves.

Second, a corollary of women's fear of men's power and men's disdain for women's weakness has been suggested by Campbell (1993). Knowledge that the man is almost certain to win in a physical confrontation with a woman creates an invisible barrier between women and men in intimate relationships and reinforces the man's power. Intimacy is threatened, and antagonism prevails. The distance created, Campbell argues, is one factor that increases women's vulnerability to abuse.

Third, because aggression is assumed to be correlated with assertiveness and competitiveness, women conveniently are denied access to arenas in which these attributes are valued— not surprisingly, those most associated with power such as politics, business, and the military. Adams (1992) suggested that the belief that "male monopolization of warfare is evidence that war is a product of biology" (p. 18) is a politically useful myth that has allowed men monopoly over the tools of war and ultimately led to economic and political control of the state. Hoffman and Hurst (1990) have argued that stereotypes rationalize the distribution of the sexes into different social roles, especially when it is assumed that the roles are biologically based.

Fourth, aggressive women are labeled more deviant and pathological than are comparably aggressive men. This naming process not only denies aggressive women the opportunity to be heard, but also serves to deter aggressive behavior out of fear of punishment. The possibility that women's aggression is justified is reduced, and the legitimacy of their behavior is discounted. Women thus develop feelings of anxiety and guilt about expressing their anger and frustration in

aggressive ways. Given that deviance is commonly defined as behavior that departs from cultural norms and that violence is not socially condoned, it is hardly surprising that "aggressive" women have been labeled more deviant than "aggressive" men (Anderson, 1993). As with many other phenomena, the perspective of men is the yardstick against which the behavior of women is measured (Morris, 1987). In Campbell's (1993) discussion, culture deems male aggression rational; a means—ends analysis is appropriated by men to justify their behavior, whereas women's aggression is seen as irrational and emotional.

Fifth, until recently, the stereotype of the nonaggressive woman has led many to ignore female aggression as a phenomenon in and of itself (Bjorkqvist & Niemela, 1992). According to Paul and Baenninger (1991), "believing that males aggress more than females promotes an implicit ignorance and lack of interest about the situations in which females do aggress, the characteristics of their aggressive behavior, and the profiles of those who are their victims" (p. 403).

Thus, the myth of the nonaggressive woman sustains male power. Women's voices are silenced. Men do not have to listen to women's reasons for aggression, nor attempt to solve the problems that lead to female aggression. This is particularly convenient because data indicate that female aggression is frequently in response to an abusive partner's behavior. The power women have to control others does not have to be acknowledged, even to women.

Female Aggression in Intimate Relationships

Research indicates that women are as likely as men to aggress in situations that are congruent with their gender role orientation, such as family settings (Towson & Zanna, 1982). Strong support appears evident in studies reporting women to be as aggressive, if not more so, than men in intimate relationships (Archer & Ray, 1989; Bookwala, Frieze, Smith, & Ryan, 1992; Johnson, 1990; Malone, Tyree, Sr O'Leary, 1989; O'Leary et al., 1989; Paul & Baenninger, 1991; White & Koss, 1991). However, most research on female aggression in intimate relationships has been examined via self-reports of aggressive behavior in marital relationships. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to critique fully this literature, several cautions should be noted (see Yllo & Bograd, 1988, for more extensive information). Because most of the data are self-reports, it would be premature to accept these data as accurate reflections of the amount of aggression in intimate relationships. Women may be more willing to report negative behaviors than men (Inwald, quoted in Adler, 1993); there may be gender-related differences in the salience of memories for certain verbal and physical behaviors; and the criteria that women and men use for labeling a certain action a yell or slap may be gender-related. Biernat, Manis, and Nelson (1991) have shown that gender stereotypes influenced objective (i.e., providing numerical estimates), but not subjective (i.e., Likert scale ratings) estimates. Research has documented that women are more accurate decoders of nonverbal behavior than men (Hall, 1984). Also, it has been documented that the same body movements are more likely to be labeled aggressive (de Meijer, 1991) or dominant (Henley & Harmon, 1985) when performed by a man than by a woman.

In keeping with the notion of the nonaggressive woman, the first studies published about spousal abuse perpetrated by women were met with mixed reviews (Geller & Cornell, 1985). Many argued that women were too passive to perpetrate abusive acts against their spouses. Others suggested that men, because of their typically larger physiques, were not capable of being abused by

their wives. Still others proposed that women were less capable than men of inflicting serious harm or injury on a man and that, therefore, physical violence by women against their spouse was more acceptable (Arias & Johnson, 1989). Researchers cited as evidence the relatively small number of men who reported spousal abuse (Steinmetz & Lucca, 1988).

A national survey conducted on spousal abuse in 1975 revealed not only that women were more likely than men to report physically abusing their spouses, but that "wives committed an average of 10.3 acts of violence against their husbands during 1975, whereas their husbands averaged only 8.8 acts against their wives" (Steinmetz & Lucca, 1988, pp. 237-238). In another study, among married couples assessed 18 months after marriage, 36 % of the women and 25% of the men indicated that they had physically aggressed against their spouse (O'Leary et al., 1989). Female aggression in relationships, however, is not limited to marital relationships. O'Leary et al. (1989) found that 44 % of the women compared to 31 % of the men reported physically aggressing against their dating partner to whom they were engaged. Using a national sample of higher education students, White and Koss (1991) found that over 80 % of the women and men reported inflicting as well as sustaining verbal aggression, and approximately 36 % reported inflicting physical aggression, with 39 % of the men and 32 % of the women sustaining some physical aggression. Bookwala et al., (1992) reported slightly higher figures for physical aggression directed toward dating partners (59% for women and 55% for men).

Despite the fact that women are as likely as men to report engaging in physical aggression against their spouse or dating partner, we would be remiss if we did not point out that women are more likely to sustain serious injury than are men. The primary reason for women's visits to emergency rooms is injury due to battering by a male partner. Also, men are more likely to murder their partner than are women: "In 1991, when some 4 million women were beaten and 1,320 murdered in domestic attacks, 622 women killed their husbands or boyfriends" (Booth, McDowell, & Simpson, 1993).

Although women have been reported to initiate acts of violence against their spouses as frequently as men (Steinmetz & Lucca, 1988; Stets & Straus, 1990), the motives of women and men for aggression differ. In self-reports of reasons for spousal homicide, the most frequently cited reason among women is self-defense, whereas among men the most common justification is sexual jealousy and/or the wife threatening to terminate the relationship (Cazenave & Zahn, 1992). Women who initiate acts of violence frequently do so in anticipation of an abusive attack from their partner.

Traditionally, gender roles confined women to the domestic sphere. The resultant opportunity to engage in violence against husbands and children was greater than the opportunity to aggress in the public sphere. Childcare duties present women with one of the primary arenas for aggressive behavior. Thus, the high rates of female involvement in child abuse are not surprising. Some studies suggest that women are more likely than men to physically abuse their children (Johnson, 1990; Steinmetz & Lucca, 1988).

Towson and Zanna (1982) suggested possible reasons for heightened female aggression in gender-role congruent situations. First, they argued that situations such as the home may be more central to a woman's self- concept than other situations. Thus, any threat to this aspect of their

self-definition may provoke the expression of aggressive feelings. Second, they suggested that society may be more accepting of women aggressing in situations that are feminine. A third possibility is opportunity. Some situations are more conducive to violence than others. The home offers a private sanctuary with few external restraints on violence. A fourth possibility, not mentioned by Towson and Zanna, is power. The home is the realm where women are expected to hold and exercise authority, thus to the extent that power corrupts men, it may also corrupt women.

Research on female aggression in intimate relationships should not be taken to indicate, however, that women are not aggressive in nonfamily situations. An examination of crime statistics, although supporting the idea that women are, indeed, less aggressive than men in most realms, suggests that women are not passive. For example, according to the Uniform Crime Reports (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1990), women accounted for 10.4 % of all arrests for murder and non-negligent manslaughter, and for 13.3 % of all arrests for aggravated assaults.

Thus, both in and out of the domestic realm, women have been shown to commit acts of aggression. That women equal or exceed men in the number of reported aggressive acts committed within the family suggests two things. First, it suggests, again, that the notion of the nonaggressive woman is a myth. Second, it provides an impetus for increased study into the topic of female aggression as a distinct and legitimate phenomenon.

Increased Attention to Female Aggression

With the realization that the notion of the nonaggressive woman is a myth, researchers in recent years have devoted increased attention to the patterns and causes of female aggression and violence. "By the 1970s and 1980s, women's aggression had become harder and harder to ignore. Female criminologists began to write about this taboo subject, and national surveys revealed women's high level of aggression in the home" (Campbell, 1993, p. 143). Part of this increased attention stems from a group of scholars interested in the phenomenon of female aggression—scholars who were willing to dismiss the myth of the nonaggressive woman on empirical grounds.

However, this interest has met with resistance and created its own problems. Campbell (1993) noted, "Instead of putting a spotlight on the new findings, however, these uncomfortable events trigger the minimization phase. . . . Men preferred not to dwell on women's aggression because it was an ugly sign of potential resistance" (p. 143). According to Chesney- Lind (1987), nonfeminist researchers have muddied the waters, lending "support for those who are seeking scientific legitimacy for patterns of personal and institutional sexism" (p. 208). Research on female aggression may be used to blame women for instigating their own abuse. Prosecutors, for example, have argued that some women are using the Battered Women Syndrome (Walker, 1984) as an excuse to cover up the premeditated murder of their husbands in order to avoid divorce and to gain financially (Booth et al., 1993). In fact, some argue that increased attention to female aggression is undermining the women's movement. "Women's groups colluded with them [men]; to recognize its existence would draw attention away from men's far more lethal aggression as well as highlighting undesirably assertive qualities in a group they wanted to depict

as victims. Most violent offenders were men, so women's aggression was not a serious problem" (Campbell, 1993, p. 143).

Alternatively, the recent attention to women's aggression may represent a backlash in response to the women's movement. In 1975, attention to female criminality was first publicized when Freda Adler wrote *Sisters in Crime* in which she stated that the rise in female crime was a result of the women's movement and reflected the darker side of liberation. In other words, women were becoming like men. Ann Jones (1980) in her book *Women Who Kill* countered by arguing that the women's movement created a great deal of anxiety in people threatened by women's freedom. One result of this, she proposed, was an increased awareness of women's aggressive behavior and law enforcement's greater willingness to arrest and prosecute women— a crackdown precipitated not by a crime wave but by a fear of women's struggle for freedom. The chivalry hypothesis, as it has been called, implicates the women's movement by suggesting that women's push for equality implies equality in the justice system as well (Simon & Landis, 1991). Proponents of this theory argue that female crime is no more frequent than in the past, but that women are now more likely to be brought to the attention of the criminal justice system and convicted for their crimes. Of all female criminals, women who murder their spouse have the shortest criminal histories. However, women who murder are typically given more severe penalties for spousal homicide than men who murder their spouses (Browne, 1988). For example, a woman who commits spousal homicide is likely to receive a sentence of 15-20 years, whereas the sentence for a man who kills his spouse is only 2-6 years (Booth et al., 1993).

Another reason for increased interest in female aggression is that many women are attaining greater power in their relationships. That is, there may have been some truth in the myth of women's submissiveness and weakness in the past, but women themselves are now changing. The women's movement has increased awareness of the victimization of women within intimate relationships. Women are acknowledging that being hit, kicked, and slapped are abusive acts, no matter who the batterer. Women realize that acceptance and forgiveness are not their only options; anger, defiance, and fighting back are also avenues for them. Women who kill abusive partners have suffered more serious abuse than women who do not kill an abusive spouse and are more likely to have children who have been abused (Ewing, cited in Booth et al., 1993). One national survey of homicides in urban areas found that, as the number of shelters for abused women increased, the number of women killing spouses declined. On the other hand, the presence of shelters does not seem to alter the rate at which men kill their partners (Zahn, 1993).

On the basis of evidence, therefore, several conclusions can be drawn. First, men are more likely than women to express their aggression publicly and physically. Part of this stems from fewer social restrictions placed on men in the expression of aggression relative to women. Women's aggression is restricted primarily to the home and to more indirect modes of expression. In addition, close examination of the means and standard deviations reported in some studies for aggressive acts perpetrated by boys and girls or men and women suggests that there are, in fact, as many within-group differences as there are between-group differences (see Archer, Pearson, & Westeman, 1988, for an example).

Theories of Female Aggression

A traditionalist account of aggression assumed that men have always been aggressive because of God's design and/or biological determinants; men's aggressiveness was seen as universal and natural (Lerner, 1986).¹ On the basis of this long-standing belief, scientific theories developed. These theories have been catalogued variously as biological, social, cultural, anthropological, political, and psychological. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to review fully all the various theories, several exemplars will be described. What is critical in examining these theories is that those who have power define what constitutes aggression and violence.

The first "modern" theory of aggression was Freudian. Male aggression was rooted in resolution of the Oedipal complex. Aggression directed toward others was seen as normal and as a compensation for the frustration of childhood sexual instincts. Reinterpretation of Freudian theory into learning terms led Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears (1939) to posit the frustration—aggression hypothesis. Although this hypothesis has undergone many transformations, it remains an exemplar of the individualistic paradigm that has dominated discourses about human aggression. This paradigm focuses on individual behavior devoid of social context, and has been at the center of feminist critiques of research methods in psychology (Wallston & Grady, 1985). This paradigm is reflected in the major laboratory formats developed in the 1960s to study aggression (Berkowitz, 1962; Buss, 1961; Taylor & Epstein, 1967). Macaulay (1985) has argued that in this dominant paradigm, "The preferred explanation for aggressive behaviors is individual . . . There is no place in this model for an interactive person-norms-situation process;" furthermore, the paradigm " . . . specifies various external and internal variables that shape aggression. They may deflect it, mute it, determine the specific behavior, and even cause flight or passivity rather than fighting, but they are still seen as variables acting on an expected, reliable response . . . The model comprehends control of aggression but not nonaggressive action as a full-fledged normal or usual response" (p. 209). The major theoretical models reflecting this paradigm were models of men's behavior. It was assumed that women were less prone to frustration or anger, hence less aggressive.

When instances of female aggression were observed, attempts were made to account for it. Theories of female aggression can be categorized as male-centered theories (i.e., extensions of theories of male aggression), sex-specific theories, and feminist theories.

Male-centered theories. Once the reality of female aggression was recognized, explanations of aggression obtained from studies of men were assumed to generalize to the population of women as well (Morris, 1987). These theories began with the premise that the underlying motivation for aggression and the processes of acquiring aggressive behavior are the same for women and men, but that gender-related factors affect the quantity and quality of the expressed behavior. Because these theories were originally formulated to account for instances of male aggression, they reflect an underlying "male-as-normative" perspective. This perspective ignores a wide range of aggressive behaviors and perpetuates myths about female aggression.

Some contemporary psychoanalysts have suggested that women and men possess the same drives and impulses, but "differ exclusively in how drives and aggressive impulses are worked through and expressed . . . [and] may to a large extent be explained on the basis of forms and practices of child rearing" (Mitscherlich, 1987, p. 224). This results in men's turning aggression outward and women's turning aggression inward. Similarly, social/environmental theories stress

the differential socialization experiences of men and women. The mechanisms of social learning (including rewards, punishments, and modeling) result in different behavioral outcomes for women and men. Although social learning theory appears situation-centered, even its major proponent reflects underlying male-centered assumptions about women: "low aggressive modeling by females reflects differential inhibition rather than differential learning of aggression" (Bandura, 1973, as discussed in Macaulay, 1985). This male-as-norm approach assumes that as role expectations of women and men become more similar, female and male patterns of aggressive behavior will become more similar. Three specific hypotheses reflect this expectation. They are the masculinization, opportunity, and marginalization hypotheses.

According to the masculinization hypothesis, as women take on more masculine characteristics and take advantage of opportunities traditionally open only to men, they, too, will show more aggressive behaviors (Adler, 1975). However, mixed support for this idea has been obtained. On the one hand, comparisons of incarcerated women with nonincarcerated controls suggest that women in prison maintain more traditional attitudes than control women (Simon & Landis, 1991). On the other hand, a number of studies have suggested that masculine gender role orientation is a better predictor of aggression than is gender (Kogut, Langley, & O'Neal, 1992; Thompson, 1991). Results may be mixed because some women commit crimes in collaboration with men; these women may hold more traditional gender role attitudes than other women who commit crimes.

Simon and Landis (1991), in discussing the opportunity hypothesis of female crime, suggest that many crimes are limited to particular situations. For example, unless one is involved in the work force, it is very difficult to commit work-related crimes. The implication is that as more women move into the labor force there will be an increase in such crimes. Similarly, as women become more economically self-sufficient, they will be less likely to assume the role of victim (Simon & Landis, 1991). Furthermore, borrowing from social learning theory, proponents of the opportunity hypothesis argue that, as more women move into the work place, they will experience role strain. The stress, anger, and frustration resulting from this role strain will exacerbate their tendency to engage in physical acts of violence against their spouses (O'Leary, 1988).

In contrast to the opportunity theory, the economic marginalization theory suggests that the lack of opportunities open to women has contributed to the rise in female aggression and crime. Because many women live at or below the poverty line, they perform aggressive criminal acts to acquire money and property for their family (Simon & Landis, 1991).

Sex-specific theories. Failure of male-centered theories to explain adequately female behavior suggested the need for separate female theories of aggression. These approaches suggested that the nature, motives, and manner of aggression are distinctly different for women and men. Sex-specific explanations of female aggression begin with the assumption that normal women are nonaggressive because of innate characteristics. Sex-specific theories include evolutionary and biologically based explanations. Biological theories of aggression proposed that men are more aggressive than women because of higher testosterone levels (Johnson, 1972). Any deviation from the normal female personality (i.e., nurturant, nonviolent) is associated with deviant, but sex-linked personality characteristics such as being overly emotional, impulsive, or "blinded by love." These theories suggest that female violence is linked to an inability to control emotions,

but not linked to social factors. Thus, women who do aggress have a problem with their biologically based gender identity (Balkan et al., 1980). See Salzman (1979) for a critique of the biologically based accounts of gender differences in aggression.

Sociobiological theories also suggest different genetic/hormonal paths to aggression (see Ellis, 1991 for an application of this approach to gender differences in sexual aggression). According to sociobiological accounts, to increase reproductive fitness, women behave aggressively when necessary to acquire the most desired mate and to keep that mate once acquired. This has contributed to the stereotype that motives for female crimes are predominantly of a sexual nature (Anderson, 1993; Omodei, 1981).

Similarly, some sociologists have suggested that women suffer from relational frustration (i.e., obstacles to maintaining positive affective relationships), whereas men experience status frustration (i.e., obstacles to economic power and status) (Omodei, 1981). In other words, women who commit crimes are women who have had their goal of acquiring and maintaining satisfactory relationships thwarted, a formulation consistent with revised models of the frustration—aggression hypothesis (Miller, 1941).

Feminist theories. In response to earlier approaches, feminist models are being developed that explicitly acknowledge the socially constructed meanings of aggression. Such meanings constrain the acknowledgment of female aggression, as well as its expression (Campbell, 1993). Feminist analyses of power relations indicate that men have defined who can be legitimately aggressive — effectively silencing women with regard to their aggression in response to frustration, anger, and instrumental goals. Patriarchy has hidden women's "anger from them by their belief in the naturalness of their subordination to men" (Campbell, 1993, p. 142). Mitscherlich (1987) stated, "those who dominate define what constitutes violence . . . those in power can alone stipulate whose job it is to be maternal and gentle and when" (p. 10). Campbell (1993) argued that control of women's aggression has taken three forms: concealment, denial, and redefinition by men. Male power has allowed men to declare the "correct" interpretation of an event. She argued that a "masculine" instrumental view of aggression has led to a reinterpretation of other forms of expression of anger. Campbell's analysis suggests that instrumental forms of aggression have attained legitimacy, whereas more expressive forms have not. She used this approach to explain the controversy surrounding the legal treatment of battered women who kill, the psychiatric labeling of aggressive women, and aggression as part of premenstrual syndrome. In each case, because an androcentric rational means-ends analysis fails to account fully for a woman's aggressive behavior, "female aggression remains shrouded in mystery — capricious, irrational, arbitrary . . . violent women must be either trying to be men or just crazy" (p. 144).

Feminist theories emphasize the need to understand female violence in terms of the status of women in society — to reveal, acknowledge, and define it from the woman's perspective, including the instrumental and expressive. The intersection of race, class, and gender is of central importance to these theories. Feminists agree with the assertions of social learning theorists regarding the effects of social arrangements, including stress, on women's and men's aggressive behavior. However, feminists push the analysis further to bring patriarchy to center stage, with its attendant differential status and power. Female aggression is judged more harshly by society than male aggression, because it reflects a greater departure from social norms (Paul (Sr

Baenninger, 1991). The power differences between women and men, along with women's restricted opportunities and resources, contribute to an increased likelihood of female aggression occurring in interpersonal relationships rather than in other contexts.

Feminists also analyze community responses to female aggression, noting that the "official" response reflects a male perspective. Presently, self-defense is not judged an adequate legal defense for aggression unless a woman was in imminent danger at the time of the violence (Booth et al., 1993). The feminist perspective recognizes the inequality of the relationship (i.e., men's greater power and physical stature) in explaining why a woman would wait until a partner was vulnerable before attacking.

Feminists are less concerned with who is more aggressive, women or men, and are more focused on the outcome. The search for differences perpetuates the subordination of women and encourages biology-based theories and victim-blaming (Fine & Gordon, 1991). The problem of female aggression is located within interpersonal and institutionalized patterns of a patriarchal society. Violence is examined from a woman's perspective — what are her circumstances and options? A woman's violence is understood, though not condoned, by considering her limited options. Until alternative means to safety and security are provided, a woman's aggression in the context of an abusive relationship is seen as a survival response— a response to circumstances, not a manifestation of personal pathology.

One theory or two? We argue that a single theory of aggression is adequate, when gender is defined as a socially constructed process (Unger & Crawford, 1992) and is central in the theory. A single feminist theory that applies to both women and men is recommended. It recognizes the central role of patriarchy in two senses. First, historical and sociocultural factors have coalesced to create multiple messages and consequences that support male aggression and deny female aggression. Second, hierarchical arrangements endorsed by patriarchy support the general message that some people, by virtue of their sex, race, age, socioeconomic status, and other markers of power, have the right to dominate, control, and hurt others. This message allows patriarchal accounts of violence to play central roles in models of female aggression (including women's aggression toward children and lesbian aggression). Aggression is a result more of power than of personality differences.

Recent data illustrate the value of single models to account for female and male aggression. In studies of marital violence (Malone et al., 1989) and dating violence (White, Koss, & Kissling, 1991), it has been found that the same factors predict female and male aggression, although the paths (i.e., the relative weights of each factor) differ. Applying the same model to female and male data made it possible to determine when one factor was relatively more important than another in the prediction of aggression. Similarly, White (1988) and White and Roufail (1989) demonstrated that women and men hold similar preferences for the use of various influence strategies, with physical aggression being a last resort choice. Furthermore, situational factors determined choice of strategies.

Because aggression and violence are complex, multiply determined phenomena, sociocultural explanations alone are inadequate to account for individual differences. Not all men are aggressive and not all women are nonaggressive. Not all men rape, and not all abused women

kill their abusers. A feminist account must be sufficiently rich to account for these individual differences. An adequate model must incorporate intrapersonal and interpersonal psychological mechanisms. Also, a person's understanding of appropriate norms must be part of the model. Data indicate that boys approve of aggression significantly more than do girls (Huesmann, Guerra, Zelli, & Miller, 1992). Boys also expect more rewards and fewer punishments for behaving aggressively than girls (Perry, Perry, & Weiss, 1989). Self-presentational studies of aggression have found that women are more likely than men to make derogatory self-statements regarding their aggressive episodes to avoid incurring negative reactions from an audience (Campbell & Muncer, 1987). Finally, a developmental perspective that examines how children learn aggressive behavior in the context of interactions with major social institutions (i.e., family, peer group, media, religion) will help our understanding of gender-related patterns of behavior and the difficulty of changing patterns of aggression.

Dutton's embedded perspective, developed to account for the domestic assault of women, and adopted by White and Koss (1993) to account for male sexual aggression, provides a good example of a model for understanding gender-related patterns of aggression. The model proposes that behavior is the result of the interplay of individual characteristics and various social and cultural factors. Thus, aggression can be best understood by considering the interaction of factors at several levels, the ontogenetic (intrapyschic), Microsystems (dyadic level of interaction), exosystems (social structures that define appropriate behaviors), and macrosystems (the larger social context, including cultural norms and values).

CONCLUSION

Acknowledging the reality of female aggression is not inconsistent with feminist goals. A primary feminist goal is eliminating the oppression of women. This oppression is most dramatically seen in the high levels of violence against women in intimate relationships — incest, dating violence, wife abuse, sexual assault, rape, and murder. The fact that women report being aggressive in these very same relationships does not undermine in any way the seriousness of their own victimization or that of their children. Historical evidence and current statistics document high levels of female victimization. Recognition of this fact does not mean that individual women are weak and helpless. History is replete with examples of the power women garnered from recognizing their victimization. Empowerment comes from the knowledge gained by naming. Once victimization of women was named for what it was (i.e., rape, battering), women could band together to protest it. Women can emerge from being victims with a sense of entitlement and efficacy. Many protest movements gained their energy from collective anger.

The debate today about the proper attention to women's aggression vis-à-vis women's victimization must be understood in the context of a contradiction created by women's historical circumstance. Lerner (1986) argued that women's victimization is the result of exclusion from history-making as well as other forms of subordination to men, but that "it is a fundamental error to try to conceptualize women primarily as victims" (p. 5). She argued that the dialectic created by the "contradiction between women's centrality and active role in creating society and their marginality in the meaning-giving process" (p. 5) has moved women forward. It is only when we look at violence against women from an androcentric point of view that we equate violence against women with female weakness. By deconstructing the myth of the nonaggressive woman, the trap of gendered dualism (male/female : powerful/weak : perpetrator/victim) is recognized

and the advantages of the myth to men is diminished. Violence in the United States is recognized as a major problem facing this country today. Other than in intimate relationships, where wives are murdered 2.4 times more than husbands (U.S. Department of Justice, FBI, 1992), men are the targets of murder more often than women. Yet no one is claiming that these high rates of victimization render an image of men as weak and helpless. Debating whether attention to women's aggression denies women's victimization is a distraction from the important analysis of patriarchy's contribution to women's and men's aggression and victimization. Thus, the question is not who is more aggressive. In fact, available data do not provide a clear answer to this question. Rather, the important questions concern the cultural, social, and psychological circumstances surrounding incidents of aggression by women and men.

NOTE

1. Lerner (1986) posited another historical account of male aggression. A Marxist-economic analysis argued that male aggression was based on the overthrow of earlier female dominance or equality.

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