The “Great Taboo” and the Role of Patriarchy in Husband and Wife Abuse

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The role of historical memes such as the “Rule of Thumb” is explored and documented to illustrate how the notion of patriarchy defined as “male dominance over women” is deeply flawed. The “Rule of Thumb” as anything other than a rough and ready measure is shown to be both a historical myth and the result of sophistry by some women’s activists. The continuation of the ancient meme of patriarchy, as expressed, for example, by the Skimmington, is shown to predict the controversy over the existence of female-perpetrated violence and male victims, a controversy that saw academics who sought to expose such violence being subjected to intimidation and abuse. Patriarchy is proposed as an influence on the occurrence and prevalence of both husband and wife abuse, operating through the patriarchal meme that “men should not be victims.” The importance of these considerations for men’s emotional and physical health is emphasized.

Keywords: Rule of Thumb, intimate assaults, patriarchy, male victims, Skimmington

He can chew iron bars, Cutilianos can.
He can halt trains, Cutilianos can.
He can grind stones, Cutilianos can.
What if he can chew iron bars?
Bold as a lion as he is
Once in his humble home
Cutilianos shakes like a jelly before his Missus.
Oh, how frightened poor Cutilianos is of her.
But, let no one know about this.1, at next page
In the thirty years since violence and abuse between intimate partners came to prominent public awareness and became the subject of academic study, one topic has remained controversial: the plight of men who are the victims of assaults by their female partners. This “Great Taboo” (George, 1994) is the coalescence of two forbidden beliefs in society: first, that a man can be beaten by a woman, which is an anathema particularly to men; second, the uncomfortable reality that women can be aggressive and violent, which contravenes stereotypical notions of femininity and is an attribution that neither men nor women wish to acknowledge (Oglivie, 1996).

Murray Straus, Richard Gelles, and Susan Steinmetz (Gelles, 1974; Gelles, Straus, & Steinmetz, 1975) first identified intimate violence as a phenomenon and found that it existed in both male-to-female and female-to-male forms. The latter revelation proved to be controversial and provoked a debate which, while much more balanced and open now than it was then, is still contentious. The debate is one enjoined by many academics (Fiebert, 2004) but also exists as a lay phenomenon argued among interest groups, including those who advocate on behalf of men’s or women’s rights.

Much of the debate has centred upon the ever-growing body of studies, using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus, 1979), that demonstrate conclusively that women are as assaultive (if not more so) as men in heterosexual relationships. This conclusion is based on answers given by women themselves (Archer, 2000, 2002). It is not the intention of this paper to review arguments that have arisen out of criticism and defence of the CTS-based studies and their implications. That has been done elsewhere by a number of authors using different viewpoints and approaches. The purpose of this paper is to address the fact that battered husbands and intimate violence against men by female partners has existed within the context of a taboo that appears to have originated long ago (George, 2002, 2003).

Ancient Memes, Modern Myth

During thirty years of research into intimate abuse, the plight of women victims has been the major focus of study. This has taken place against the backdrop of political advocacy for women’s rights in which, in the early years at least, the plight of female victims included an important call for public sympathy. By defining the problem as one based on patriarchy and the oppression of women, it was possible to assert a worldview in which only men were perpetrators and only women were victims (Dutton, 1994). The idea of victimisation of males by females in domestic violence was, by definition, not possible. Advocacy overtook research, which was subverted and became advocacy. Facts were obscured by simplistic structural explanations (Dutton; Hoff-Sommers, 1996) that permitted a “groupthink” of falsehoods to develop and be sustained (Dutton; Dutton & Nicholls, 2005). Research in the area of intimate violence was devalued and became “fictive” (Taborsky & Sommer, 2001).

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1 (from page 7) The 19th Century Greek folk poem “Cutalianos” was supplied and translated by N. Georgouli (September, 1998).
Examples of this based on the notion of the “Rule of Thumb” show how research became propaganda. The notion became central to the thesis of patriarchal hegemony, which was deemed to result in male violence toward intimate females and produced the oppression of women (Bograd, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Specifically, according to some activists, an early instrument of English law made it lawful for a man to beat his wife, providing he used a stick no thicker than his thumb. The first references to the “Rule of Thumb” as legitimising husbands’ violence toward wives appeared in 1976 and 1977. A supposed legal right of husbands to chastise wives was cited by Del Martin (1976) in her book *Battered Wives*. Martin drew upon the comments of two American judges who “thought” that there had been an ancient English law allowing husbands to chastise their wives. Despite the fact that these judges had rejected such legitimacy and found the husbands before them guilty in cases of intimate violence, their comments seemed to suggest a degree of tolerance, which Martin exploited. She claimed there had been a common law which allowed English husbands to whip their wives, provided they used a switch no bigger than their thumb and said this was a “Rule of Thumb” rather than a simple measure (Shaeffer, 2005).

Davidson (1977) used the presumed historical authority of Blackstone’s *Commentaries on English Law*, published between 1765 and 1769, and the authoritative text on English common law of its time. Davidson claimed that Blackstone had stated there was an ancient English common law that gave husbands the right to chastise wives. The exposure of husbands’ violence against their wives, both in the UK and North America, as well as well-documented historical research showing the extent of male working-class violence in England (Cobbe, 1878; Tomes, 1978) provided fertile ground for such claims to be made and remain unquestioned.

Soon after Martin and Davidson, “The Rule of Thumb” was quoted in women’s studies textbooks and in newspapers and magazines (Sommers, 1996). By the time it featured in the title of a report to the United States Commission on Civil Rights in 1982, the notion had assumed unquestioned acceptance as established historical fact.

In retrospect both Martin and Davidson were journalists without other academic authority and yet their claims have been quoted as authoritative fact in legal journals (Shaefer, 2005). Not until later, when Sommers sought to expose the fraud and exaggeration among ideological activists did the real context of Blackstone’s comments come to light (Sommers, 1996). Sommers reported that the full text of Blackstone was strikingly different than had been reported. Blackstone had actually noted that “there may have been” in some long-forgotten time before he was writing a “common law” that had allowed a man to beat his wife. In other words he was not sure such a law had existed. Blackstone had made it clear that in the more enlightened time in which he was writing such a practice was considered to be neither legitimate nor civilised. In fact it was both immoral and illegal. Blackstone, then, did no more than give credence to the conjecture that there may have been such a “common law” long ago. Clearly, he had been misconstrued by Davidson.

Kelly (1994) has shed more light on the matter. Trying to trace the origin of the “Rule of Thumb” to anything more than a rough and ready measure, he found many sources in which authors supposed that a “wife beating law” had existed in some dark time long before they were writing. However, each writer relied for his evidence of the law’s existence on some previous author, who had also made the same supposition for the contrary.
about the law’s existence “some long time before.” Nowhere could any such real law be found, nor could it shown to have developed as common law. Indeed many instances were found showing that women enjoyed some protection under the law against violence by their husbands and that wife beating was seen by many as unacceptable and unmasculine.

For example, in the second tome of *Homiles*, published in 1563, Kelly found, “But yet I mean not that a man should beat his wife; God Forbid; for that is the greatest of shame that can be, not for her that is beaten, as to him that doth the deed.”

And a little later, in 1609, William Heale wrote: “In the whole body of law Canon or Civil, I have not yet found set down . . . or otherwise passed . . . that it is lawful for a husband to beat his wife.”

Case law examples in the 1600s showed that English women could seek the protection of the court against a violent husband. In 1615, the wife of Sir Thomas Seymour went to court against her husband seeking alimony from him because he beat her such that she could not live with him. Later, in 1659, in the case of Manby v. Scott the court declared that a man cannot beat his wife and that she could “seek the peace” against him. In 1674, the wife of Lord Liegh sought a prayer for peace against her husband, since she was “in fear of him.” It was granted and she was given alimony of £200 per annum, the modern equivalent of about £2 million a year.

Further evidence of court records from the Westminster Quarter Sessions 1680-1720 shows women prosecuting their male partners for assaults in a manner which was empowering and provided access to legal redress against abusive partners (Hurl-Eamon, 2005). These records also show that women were considerably violent themselves, given that they were before the court as perpetrators of violence in approximately one third of assault cases. Accused women were more likely to have assaulted family or household members or neighbours than others (George, 2002, 2003).

The evidence presented by Kelly (1994) shows unequivocally that the “Rule of Thumb” was never anything more than a rough “measure.” No statute seems to have existed and common law, as far as it was based upon case law, indicated clearly that a woman could seek the protection of the court against violence by her husband under medieval and early modern English law.

Other sources detail the situation in America. The records of the Plymouth Bay Colony are clear that domestic infractions by either husband or wife were prohibited and that a number of such indictments were brought both against men and women (Demos, 1970). In 19th century America wife beaters were generally despised and could be subject to both formal and informal justice, such as public beatings or whippings by members of their communities (Pleck, 1979, 1987). However, as in England before modern processes of law were in effect, the enforcement of criminal law against wife beaters was somewhat haphazard and inconsistent, as was the enforcement of law more generally (Ruff, 2001).

The following rhyme, which was used in the exposure of wife batters in 19th century Yorkshire (Cobbe, 1878), shows that even though formal mechanisms of justice were defective, wife beaters did not escape social sanction:
There is a man in this place
Has beat his wife
Has beat his wife!!

'Tis a very great shame and disgrace
To all that live in this place.

In England, considerable concern was expressed during the Victorian era for the
plight of battered wives. Representatives of The Society for the Protection of Women
monitored magistrates as they conducted trials of wife beaters to ensure that undue le-
niency or discrimination would be brought to official attention (George, 2003). When
the very earliest, systematically kept English court records (c. 1559) are examined, it
is true that many cases of men being prosecuted for violence against wives are found

Despite this evidence, which was waiting to be discovered, the myth of the “Rule
of Thumb” as a “law” legitimating the beating of wives by husbands gained unchal-
lengeable credence in the 1970s and has remained as an often-repeated justification for
the deconstruction of patriarchal values in contemporary intimate abuse literature. The
reality is, however, that no one checked the ancient sources, or if they did, no one dared
to publish their findings, with the notable exception of Kelly (1994). As Demos (1970)
had noted regarding the notion of male domestic supremacy and female timidity in
early America, reality was “another story altogether.”

The extent to which the idea of “male dominance” has become pre-eminent can be
seen widely. For instance, recent work by Archer (2004), who has written quite exten-
sively on intimate violence, sought to give justification to the historical plight of women
under “patriarchal subjugation.” Quoting an authoritative analysis of violence in Europe
between 1500-1800 (Ruff, 2001), he quoted the 12th century writer Gratian, whose De-
cretium appeared to give legal authority to a husband’s right to chastise his wife. Gra-
tian’s work was initially a compendium of canonical law dating back to the Justinian
(6th-century AD). He was a cleric from Bologna whose work was quoted in a later com-
pendium of medieval works translated by Coulton (1928-30). A passage from the De-
cretium (Part 2c, VII, q.1, under gloss judicari) in Coulton reads: “...Moreover, a man
may chastise his wife and beat her for her correction, for she is of his household, and
therefore the Lord may chastise his own, as it is written.” The passage is brief and un-
helpful other than alluding to the Bible as a source of authority, but it was used in these
works as if to give ancient secular legal authority. In reality it does nothing of the sort.
Other passages in the same work give guidance on all manner of matters relating to
domestic life. For example, a man will not chastise his animals when they displease him
and since a wife provides so much more to a man, she deserves much better treatment.
In other words when the texts are seen in context there appears to be ambivalence about
the morality of chastising wives as early as 6th century. The use of only one selected
fragment of a text, however, has produced the kind of distorted view of medieval so-
ciety that careful historians of the period have warned against (Wrighton, 1978). This
seems to be such an example, whereby the field of intimate abuse research has become
contaminated.
What is clear from these texts is that while there are voices that assert men can legitimately chastise their wives, there are others that deny that such hegemony is in any way proper or desirable.\(^2\) It seems that through history these two memes—that is, units of cultural information passed along to subsequent generations—have existed in opposition and that the debate over the treatment of women is not a modern one, but one deeply entrenched in history.

Similarly, a reassessment of what “patriarchal” authority actually entailed is needed to balance the way it has been represented in contemporary literature. Perhaps the most sagacious perspective was taken by the historian Sharpe (1987) who wrote the following on patriarchy from an early modern perspective:

> The husband was always considered to be the natural head of household, and to that extent marriage was a patriarchal institution. *But this patriarchy did not constitute a harsh, tyrannical rule.* Husbands were to assert their authority as sparingly as possible, and the assumption was that in a good working marriage the friction that might otherwise provoke assertions of husbandly authority would be kept to a minimum. The writers of conduct books remembered that fundamental premise that so many historians have lost sight of: married couples had to live together under the same roof, and that was a great incentive toward developing affection, co-operation and mutual give-and-take. (p. 69)

Out of the disjuncture between the ideal and reality it is clear that while some men abused wives, in other cases wives abused husbands (Gottleib, 1993) and the rest lived in harmony with some kind of mutual understanding. The notion of male domestic dominance survived by paying lip service to a notion, rather than actual reality.

**The Power of Myth**

Propaganda about the “Rule of Thumb” myth was so powerful that it produced two immediate effects. First, it provided a sense of outrage that would be a driving force in the advancement of ideological feminism. Second, it obscured the historical record, which showed both wives *and husbands* to have been victims (Bates, 1981; Demos, 1970; George 2002, 2003), and effectively silenced any consideration that hus-

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\(^2\) Using a sociobiological perspective it can be suggested that human societies discovered early on that allowing men to exercise control using brutality toward women was counterproductive to the reproductive fecundity and fitness of women. Stress is a known to be a cause of ovulatory failure. For this reason it is suggested that societies did not legitimise such an exercise of male power, since it had negative consequences for population growth in times when threats to population survival were much greater than they are today. Early societies that sanctioned the chastisement of fertile females were doomed to failure.
bands might be victims of violence by wives by making it an utterly implausible conception given the supposed authority vested in husbands by the “Rule of Thumb.”

When initial evidence of the gender equality of intimate violence emerged in the work of Straus et al. (1980), the authors faced not only criticism but also a barrage of abuse, falsehoods and threats from women’s advocates that is now well documented (Gelles, 1994; Luccal, 1995; McNeely, Cook, & Torres, 2001; Straus, 1993). Similarly, when attempting to resurrect the argument, McNeely (see McNeely & Robinson-Simpson, 1987) also faced hostility and abuse. Robinson-Simpson was allegedly an oppressed female who had been duped by a malevolent misguided male (McNeely, Cook and Torres, 2001). As a result, according to Fillion (1997):

Currently, findings on all types of female physical and sexual aggression are being suppressed; academics who do publish their research are subjected to bitter attacks and outright vilification from some colleagues and activists, and others note the hostile climate and carefully omit all data on female perpetrators from their published reports. (pp. 229-230)

This suggests that some twenty years of silencing had occurred beginning with publications in the mid- to late-1970s.

When the full details of male abuse and threats are analysed we find that in the European literature reference to the recognition of the existence of battered husbands can be found quite widely (George, 1994, 2002, 2003). Bates (1981) noted that it was not difficult to find legal cases of battered husbands across the English-speaking world, both historically and in contemporary times.

The scholars cited were dissenting academics and their findings were silenced, temporarily at least, from discussion in the field by abuse used as a political weapon. Fortunately, the gag has not been permanent. Their situation was eloquently put by Postman and Weingartner (1971):

The history of the human group is that it has been a continuing struggle against the veneration of “crap.” Our intellectual history is a chronicle of anguish and suffering of men who tried to help their contemporaries see that some part of their fondest beliefs were misconceptions, faulty assumptions, superstitions or even down right lies. (p. 16)

Over recent years increasing numbers of authors have address the issue of male victimisation and female perpetration of violence (Archer, 2000; 2002). Perhaps now it will be possible for studies of female perpetration and male victimisation to occur in a spirit of objective scientific inquiry (Mills, Mills, Taliaferro, Zimber, & Smith, 2005) so that practitioners can recognise and assess the violent female competently as they have the violent male (Lidz, Mulvey, & Gardner, 1993).

One point of view on the topic is provided by a study of battered husbands (George, 1994). When Straus, McNeely and other authors first raised the issue, a “rough music”
of protest was raised and since there was no concept of a male victim, these authors were subjected to intimidation and humiliation. The social crime was not that male victimisation occurred, but that academics such as Straus and McNeely had brought it to public attention. Hence the Skimmington was invoked\(^3\); males could not be seen as victims and females must appear to be the appropriate and only victims. Moreover, subordinate males should not seek to undermine this order (George, 1997, 2001). Within patriarchy it was entirely predictable that intimidation and abuse would be heaped on academics who dared expose male victimisation and female violence, for it is the public exposure of male victimisation that is the real “crime” that potential undermines patriarchy.

For large sections of some interest groups surrounding intimate abuse, the myth of women as totally powerless, oppressed, unaggressive victims continues. This, despite the fact that in America, for example, the generation of females living their lives as adult women in the last quarter of the 20th century were arguably more aggressive than the generations of women immediately before them. For example, while female assaults represent a small percentage of the total, the percentage of adolescent females arrested for violent crimes in America in the period 1960-1975 rose significantly for murder (a 53% increase), manslaughter (a 132% increase), robbery (a 49% increase) and aggravated assault (a 59% increase) (Balkan & Berger, 1979, p. 221). At the same time, this cohort of women exerted political pressure through advocacy about intimate abuse of women while presumed, unrealistically, to be completely unaggressive within their own relationships. Perhaps this explains why academics came under such trenchant criticism and others saw what was happening as “male bashing 101” (Gelles, 1994). In a sense it can be argued that the emergence of a cause (in this case, women’s position in society) allied with the propaganda of oppression provided a vehicle for the expression of widespread collective female aggression, particularly utilising indirect and anonymous forms of aggression, which found its focus in the “the battered husband controversy” (see Straus, 1993).

The success of the so-called “battered women’s movement” as opposed to the failure of the so-called “battered men’s movement” in advancing their respective positions can be explained by a variety of social factors (Luccal, 1995). However, it would seem it is stereotypical gender images of men and women that make the key difference (George, 1994). Unfortunately, these still operate and are maintained by social constructions like the “Rule of Thumb” myth and by the sanctions patriarchal power exerts through the vehicle of Skimmingtons in modern guise (George, 2002). The result

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\(^3\)The Skimmington (George, 2002, 2003) was an English custom used to punish and scandalise the situation of the battered husband and was reputed to be the most elaborate of the charivari processionals. In this custom, a battered husband would be exposed to public ridicule by being paraded in public riding backwards on either a donkey or some kind of distaff. Sometimes both the husband and the wife would be paraded, tied back to back. However, the Skimmington was more about punishing the battered husband for failing in his patriarchal responsibility of controlling his wife than punishing violent wives. The social reality of the Skimmington was a warning to all men not to allow the reality of their domestic life to become public knowledge and so destroy the notion that men were “head of the household.”
is that male victimisation remains the “Great Taboo” and is denied or trivialised by many as part of the operation of maintaining patriarchal control. As Luccal points out, this reluctance to accept male victimisation is central to traditional patriarchal images of men and women, which are maintained by refusal to recognize male victims of intimate abuse.

The Myth of Power

The easy acceptance of the “male dominance” model of patriarchy (Dobash & Dobash, 1979) across the academic, politico-legal and social spheres has endured despite the fact that attempts to test the model empirically have been inconclusive. Problems with the model, such as the absence of an explanation of how male dominance translates for each male from a generalised ethos into personal power within relationships (Bogarde, 1988) are not explored, even when the majority of men are found to be non-violent in their domestic relationships (Dutton, 1994) and 95 percent of them strongly disapprove of violence against a woman (O’Leary, 1993). Even among identified male batterers research has found them to be not controlling and “macho,” but rather dependent, fearful and uncertain of their masculinity, with poor impulse control and personality disorders (Dutton).

The problem for researchers is how to translate a general ethos into defined, measurable statements. Factors such as “who has the last say” or “who takes decisions” have been used, but in research that has looked at relationship power, only 9.2 percent of men are found to be dominant, with the vast majority having equity of power with their partners and another 7.5 percent being dominated by their female partner (Coleman & Straus, 1990). Significantly, Yllo and Straus (1990) found almost no correlation between the composite measures of power used and the prevalence of violent husbands across the United States, although the degree to which it was believed husbands should dominate decision-making predicted for higher rates of wife assault in some regions of the country compared to others in which more egalitarian norms prevailed. However, high rates of wife assault were also found in regions where the status of women was high and there was a near-zero correlation between measures of structural inequality between men and women and the adherence to “patriarchal norms.” Smith (1990), in a study that attempted to assess the degree to which “patriarchal ideology” and socio-demographic factors could explain wife abuse, concluded that, at best, such ideology explained only 20 percent of the variance in wife abuse rates.

Neither are cross-cultural comparisons conclusive on the matter and there are no simple correlations between female status and abuse rates. Dutton (1994) has proposed that an ecological fallacy exists in arguments proposing that ideology and structural factors leading to female inequality result in wife or female partner abuse. Dutton suggests that no single factor can sufficiently explain the available data. Rather a variety of factors combine and coalesce to produce the phenomenon. Even if a “patriarchal ideology” does contribute to the phenomenon, it may be that its lack of explanatory power resides in the narrowness of the viewpoint within which the contemporary view of patriarchy has been constructed (that is, solely in terms of “male dominance”).

When the ideas of inversion (well understood in Medieval times) and the Skimmington are included as essential parts of patriarchal ideology, a more important and imperative message is communicated to men than that they should be dominant over
women. It is the message that they should not be victims and subservient to women, which is a very different message indeed. This fits with the data for the domestic lives of over 90 percent of men (Coleman & Straus, 1990).

The patriarchal message has been rigorously enforced throughout history via the Skimmington. It has been argued it is still enforced today in a modern guise (George, 2002) as the myth of male power. The myth is engineered specifically to hide male victimisation in many ways across all walks of life (Farrell, 1993). Most of all, however, it hides male victimisation in domestic relationships, something that must be not only just hidden, but actively denied (George, 2003). While some blame has been directed at women’s advocates and supportive academics for bias and “groupthink” in the denial of male victims of female perpetrated abuse (Dutton 1994; Dutton & Nicholls, 2005) the reality is that they were just responding to the ancient memes supportive of patriarchy that dictate denial.

In sum, the resistance to male victimisation, the “fictive” research, the “groupthink” and the threats and abuse of academics exposing male victimisation are all the “rough music” of patriarchal reaction to the attempted exposure of male victims. It would have been recognised as such by those living anywhere between the 12th and early 20th centuries under the traditions of unmodified patriarchy. Nothing has really changed. The widespread acceptance of the model of patriarchy as solely based on male dominance is due to its being at one with the lay stereotypes of men and women, which also do not acknowledge the difficulties introduced by the ideas of female violence perpetration or male victimisation.

Neither women’s advocates nor academics are to blame for anything other than repeating history, supporting patriarchy and doing its bidding to control the ordinary male. Patriarchy is central to the social control of the ordinary man. It makes men inescapably responsible and hence the appropriate targets for punishments and sanctions. So effective is this tactic that when people are asked to rate domestic violence scenarios depicting both heterosexual and homosexual victims they rate heterosexual male victims more negatively than homosexual male victims (Harris & Cook, 1994), in spite of the long and well-entrenched prejudice against male homosexuals. By contrast, female victims are rated more positively than any male victims, and female perpetrators are rated less negatively than any male perpetrators. Unfortunately for males, most men prefer to be seen as bad, rather than sad, and so men are as guilty of maintaining the delusion as some women are of exploiting it.

Patriarchy, then, is not as simple as “male dominance” and it is no wonder that efforts to equate the prevalence of wife abuse with certain measures designed to test it have produced equivocal results. The correlation to test would be between the strength of denial of male victimisation and the prevalence of wife or female partner abuse. It is also suggested here that in societies where there is the most fervent denial of male victimisation and female perpetration, and where male victims are treated most unsympathetically, there will be the greatest prevalence of wife or female partner abuse. For instance, the highest recorded prevalence of wife or female partner abuse worldwide is found in the United States (where most studies are conducted), where the denial of male victimisation is greatest (according to the available evidence) and victimised men are punished most severely. From what is known about male batterers it would seem they are responding more to the “males must not be victims” ethos than
to the notion of male dominance and control over females. This alternative construction will very likely have explanatory power regarding levels of violence in society at large, male-to-male violence and homophobic violence, and where violence between intimates is assessed and analysed within a more general framework looking at aggressive behaviour.

For men, fear of fear is the driving force that can result in violent behaviour (George, 1997). However, for most men maturation to secure manhood includes gaining the power to be gentle, not just the strength to be strong, a journey that is accomplished by most men who lead non-violent lives (Macchietto, 1992). From this flows a sort of chivalry that makes most men deplore violence against women (O’Leary, 1993).

Male Victims

The failure of modern considerations of intimate violence to take notice of the ancient memes has resulted in a bias and false premises that have developed since the reawakening of society to the battering of wives (Dutton, 1994; George, 1994, 2003). One result has been the controversy within academic literature described above. The more important consequence by far, however, has been the perpetration of human rights abuse in the English-speaking world by politico-legal systems that historically have always punished male victims of female violence (George, 2002). This is evidenced, for example, by Sarantakos (2004), who found that the majority of women in his Australian sample who had claimed to have only used violence in self-defence were not supported in this assertion by their own mothers or children. Further, when presented with those assertions most of the women admitted that they had, in fact, been the dominant, violent and abusive partner. In every case, however, the authorities had sided with the women and treated the male victims as perpetrators, which usually for the men meant loss of custody of the children, loss of his home, restraining orders, and in some cases criminal prosecution. Violent and abusive female partners were then able to continue partner abuse at least at an emotional level through means such as child visitation denial, false allegations and other indirect means of control of the men’s lives.

The fact that relationship problems, let alone the experience of violence and abuse, are not inconsequential for men and have immense impact on their health is evidenced by recent research showing that the notion of men as invulnerable is a fiction. Even men in non-violent relationships with women find conflict in the relationship distressing (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994). Men who experience violence and abuse in relationships report emotional harm to themselves (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001) and are affected in the same ways as victimised women are (Bates, 1981; Grandin, Lupri, & Brinkerhoff, 1997; Gregorash, 1993; Hammond-Saslow, 1995; Migliacco, 2002).

British physicians at the Institute of Psychiatry, London, put the matter into stark perspective (Crowe & Ridley, 1990):

When the woman is the overtly dominant partner she will often be volatile and outspoken, social confident but prone to lose her temper at times. She will often criticise her husband for trivial “offences,”
even in front of third parties and the male partner, even though he is quite competent and effective in his work, will go along with his wife’s wishes and “give in for the sake of peace”. Such men seem to present in the clinic with loss of interest in sex within the marriage; . . . while in others they may also experience erectile impotence. (p. 325)

Loss of sexual potency, in particular erectile dysfunction, entails a loss of the sense of manliness and unendurable shame for many men. Interestingly enough, the leading psychiatrists quoted above only refer to women who are dominant, volatile, outspoken and prone to temper loss at times, not abusive and violent women.

Conclusion

The survival of patriarchy over the centuries has depended upon social memes that have passed down through societies as a means of maintaining social organisation and control. These memes have included the notion than men (1) are dominant compared to women, (2) should be seen to be the head of the household, and (3) as husbands should have the right to chastise their wives. However, memes of male chivalry toward women and wives have also been part of the patriarchal ethos, such that the wife beater has been much despised. The dictum that men should not disclose the reality of their domestic lives as a means of maintaining the aura of male dominance (George, 2003) even when the reality of their lives was otherwise is significant. From this meme, which dictated that men should not be seen to be the victim of a wife’s aggression (or be known to be cuckolded by her), charivari punishments arose to enforce male silence and/or shame. From this arose the notion of male invulnerability, which men have endured in silence down through the centuries, rather than the face shame, ostracism and social exclusion that the Skimmington entailed.

The complexity of the issues was once understood (Thompson, 1972). Given the modern focus on domestic abuse and violence, however, it appears in full measure only when an overview of the controversy that includes male victimisation has been attained. Furthering the discussion now requires that the unacknowledged memes surrounding male victimisation be researched not only in the context of male victimisation but also in connection with male violence toward female partners.

It has been argued that the gender paradigm is deeply flawed (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005), in particular the idea that intimate violence is perpetrated only by males out of a need for dominance over females. The arguments presented here suggest that the gender paradigm has further explanatory power when it is constructed differently and takes into account the ancient memes, particularly those associated with male victimisation.

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4 It is suggested that the continuation of the meme that men have some “right” to chastise wives through history is related to the fact that wife beaters have used this as a justification for their violence (Dutton, 1994). It is perhaps nothing more than the expression of psychopathology, a common finding in wife batterers, across the generations.
What is needed is a theory of gender, rather than gendered theory. For as stated previously, female victimisation will be successfully combated and reduced only when the denial of male victimisation is acknowledged and addressed as a reality by both men and women (George, 1994, 2003).

References


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