

SECOND EDITION

CURRENT CONTROVERSIES ON FAMILY VIOLENCE



Editors

Donileen R. Loseke

Richard J. Gelles • Mary M. Cavanaugh



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Donileen R. Loseke

University of South Florida

Richard J. Gelles

University of Pennsylvania

Mary M. Cavanaugh

University of Pennsylvania



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Introduction

Understanding Controversies on Family Violence

Donileen R. Loseke

Richard J. Gelles

Mary M. Cavanaugh



For more than 30 years, the introductions to books and articles about child abuse, violence against women, domestic violence, or intimate violence invariably began by pointing out the public and professional inattention to private and intimate violence. In the 1970s, such introductions were “calls to arms” about the unacknowledged significance of the problem of family violence. In the 1980s and 1990s, these introductions were designed to keep family violence on the public and professional agenda.

Now, in the early years of the twenty-first century, such introductions seem trite and overdone. After all, each year the president of the United States declares April to be “Child Abuse Prevention Month,” and October to be “Domestic Violence Awareness Month.” Public opinion surveys, content analysis of mass media, and reviews of annual state and federal legislative activity clearly demonstrate that the public, professionals, and policymakers alike are concerned about family violence. Awareness no longer is a major problem.

❖ FAMILY VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

One reason why family violence in the past was considered a private trouble was that this violence often was defined as simply a “normal” part of family life. Members of the general public tended to have an image of family violence as parents “spanking” their children, or husbands and wives “slapping” one another in the heat of arguments. Logically, there was no reason to worry about such violence because it likely would not lead to negative consequences. Encouraging the general public to condemn violence therefore required changing the idea that violence inside homes was “normal” and inconsequential.

One mechanism for changing these attitudes was to *name* the problem. Thus, advocates and researchers did not refer to violent acts as “discipline” or “marital discord,” but instead called the violence “abuse.” The term of *abuse* is an evaluation that the behavior is not tolerable, that there are limits to what is acceptable, that outsiders can—and perhaps should—intervene. By definition, “abuse” should not be a “normal” part of family life.

In order to transform family violence from a private trouble to a social issue, other changes were needed surrounding ideas about family, marriage, parenting, and gender. For example, defining violence as a matter of public concern required challenging deeply held beliefs that what goes on inside the privacy of one’s home is not the concern of others: Condemning child abuse challenges traditional beliefs that parents should have the right to discipline their children as they see fit, while condemning wife abuse challenges traditional notions that men have the right to control their wives as they see fit.

In brief, the transformation of family violence from behaviors that were invisible, ignored, denied, or minimized into something that is a topic of public concern required many changes in how people think about family, gender, parenting, and violence. In some ways, the magnitude of this change in such a short period of time is remarkable. As late as the 1970s, for example, there were complaints that police often failed to respond to calls for help when violence involved family members, or that police used a “stitch rule” to determine whether or not to arrest a violent husband: An arrest would be made only when a woman’s injuries required a certain number of stitches. Also, until quite recently, laws surrounding rape explicitly excluded women who were raped by their husbands. According to law, women gave their husbands consent to sex—all sex—when they married.

The transformation of public and political concern, however, was hardly seamless. Attempts to generate concern for the formerly defined “private troubles” of family violence did not immediately galvanize an unaware public and apathetic public policy system. Advocates often clashed with politicians about whether or not family violence existed at all and, if it did, whether it was a significant enough problem to warrant special agencies, programs, and policies. Also predictably, social change has been uneven. True, there are shelters for battered women, but there are too few. True, there are multiple interventions for abused children, but these too often are characterized more by their failures than by their successes. So, too, there has been uneven social change in attitudes: While many people believe that shelters for battered women are life-saving resources, others believe they should be closed because they are “homes for runaway wives” that promote family dissolution. Likewise, child abuse intervention is applauded as life saving by some, while others argue that it interferes with parental rights to discipline their children. And, while Americans tend to deplore extreme abuse that yields devastating consequences, other forms of violence—such as pushes, shoves, slaps, and spanks—are not condemned; they are still considered a normal and legitimate part of family life.

One recent example of such a bifurcation of attitudes about family violence is the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. The main provisions of the act prescribed steps that states must take to protect the safety and well-being of abused and neglected children. Yet, the act specifically states that nothing in it should be interpreted as a prohibition against parents using “reasonable corporal punishment” on their children. But what is “reasonable” corporal punishment? The legislation did not specifically define what is—and what is not—“reasonable.” *Reasonable* lies only in the eyes of the beholder.

Social change has been uneven, and, critically, family violence in its many forms remains surrounded by controversies. For example, naming the violence as abuse was necessary to highlight its moral intolerance. Yet this naming was not without unintended consequences, because the more pejorative the term, the less likely offenders will admit what they did and the more reluctant victims are to come forward and seek help because it is embarrassing. There also are continuing controversies among members of the general public, who approach the topic with very different kinds of understandings and values. What is evaluated as a simple “exercise in parental authority” by one person

is evaluated as “child abuse” by another; what is “sibling rivalry” to one person is “sibling abuse” to another.

❖ SOCIAL CHANGE AND FAMILY VIOLENCE EXPERTS

Social change also is found in the scholarly work surrounding this topic. Although family violence scholars in the past invariably began by noting the lack of knowledge about it, there now is so much knowledge that some professional and academic organizations have established Web sites dedicated solely to interpreting, organizing, and synthesizing new research. Theory and scientific research on family violence are regularly contained in general journals of biology, psychology, sociology, women’s studies, history, political science, and cultural studies. There are several academic journals (such as *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*, *Journal of Violence Against Women*, *Journal of Family Violence*, *Violence and Victims*, the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*) devoted entirely to this topic. This is a remarkable social change.

But it is not change without controversy. While apathetic politicians were a convenient and common enemy for early advocates, controversies soon arose between and among advocates, researchers, and practitioners. Researchers, social service providers, and social advocates whose work revolves around family violence disagree about how best to approach this personal and social problem. Indeed, family violence researchers, practitioners, and advocates do not even agree on how to define the topic itself. This book, for example, has *family* in its title, but some people argue that this label is inappropriate because public and academic attention should focus on violence among *intimates*, whether or not those intimates are family members. Still others argue that the focus of attention should be on typical *victims* of violence—women, children, elderly people—who can experience violence by family members, other intimates, social service providers, employers, and complete strangers.

Disagreements about naming the problem are only the tip of the iceberg of controversies among those whose work revolves around family violence. There were, obviously, sufficient controversies and passion in the field of family violence to allow us to publish the first edition of this book in 1993. A comparison of the first and second editions demonstrates that some controversies continue to stir passion,

others have faded into the background as either less relevant or somewhat settled by evidence or agreement, and new controversies have emerged.

❖ THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS VOLUME

This edition is about some of the most important and hotly debated issues surrounding family violence in its myriad forms. "Controversies in Conceptualization" is Section I, because when violence is defined as a particular type of problem, the stage is set for policy and practice interventions. What type of problem is family violence? Is it a problem of individual psychopathology (Dutton & Bodnarchuk)? Is violence caused by gender inequality (Yllö)? Is it a problem created by a variety of social structures, social forces, and social processes (Loseke)?

Section II centers on "Controversies in Definition and Measurement." Once violence is conceptualized as a particular type of problem, a set of research questions follows: How, specifically, should violence be defined? How should it be measured? What people should be the focus of research attention? The three controversies in this section each demonstrate how different answers to these questions lead to remarkably different research results. First, is women's violence toward men a serious social problem? If violence is measured in terms of behaviors, then women's violence against men is as serious as men's violence against women (Straus). Yet if violence is defined and measured in terms of its gendered contexts, consequences, and meanings, it makes little sense to talk about similarities in sheer number of violent acts done by women and by men (Loseke & Kurz). Second, depending on how "date rape" is defined and measured, it either is a problem affecting a large minority of women (Cook & Koss), or a problem affecting a much smaller number of women (Gilbert). Third, what is "spanking" of small children? Is it an effective and sometimes necessary parental technique of control and socialization (Rosemond)? Or is it an always ineffective and never necessary form of violence (Straus)?

Section III, "Controversies in Cause," turns to two specific controversies about the causes of violence. Both involve comparing a view that seems only common sense with an opposing perspective. First, do alcohol or other drugs cause violence? In the public imagination they do, and in this section that understanding is supported by research (Flanzer). The opposing view is that alcohol and other drugs are

associated with violence but are not its cause (Gelles & Cavanaugh). Second, what is the relationship between abused elderly people and their abusive offspring? While it seems logical that the perception of stress created by the burden of caring for elderly people might lead caretakers to become abusive (Steinmetz), perhaps it is the deviant and abusive adult children who are dependent on the elderly parents they abuse (Pillemer).

Section IV turns to "Controversies of Social Intervention." What should the public *do* about violence? While what should be done depends on how the problem and its causes are conceptualized, defined, and measured, social interventions cannot wait until controversies are resolved. Not surprisingly, social interventions themselves can become surrounded by controversy. This section considers four such controversies. First, is the battered woman syndrome a sensible and important legal defense for abused women who kill their abusive partners (Osthoff & Maguigan), or is it a false hope that actually hinders women in court (Downs & Fisher)? Second, should young children be educated in how to prevent their own abuse (Plummer), or are child sexual abuse education programs ineffective at best, harmful at worst (Reppucci, Haugaard, & Antonishak)? Third, should there be guidelines allowing workers at child abuse hotlines to filter out some calls so that they have more time to respond to the most serious cases (Besharov), or should policy encourage bringing in even more such reports (Finkelhor)? And last, are programs attempting to "save families" better for children than taking children out of their homes and placing them into foster care, with its well-known problems and failures (Wexler), or do policies to "preserve families" put abused and neglected children at risk for even more harm (Gelles)?

By highlighting controversies, the chapters in this volume explode the myth that a group of experts, such as those in family violence, hold a united vision of "the truth." But just as idealized images of home and loved ones often stand in stark contrast to lived realities, public images of experts as holders of singular and agreed-upon objective truths most often stand in contrast to the realities. Indeed, *all* professional groups are much like families, where there is a "front stage" of presentation to outsiders and a "back stage" of interactions among group members. Like families in a traditional sense, members of professional groups, such as experts on family violence, often sweep disagreements under the carpet and project a public face of agreement and accord. Disagreements among professionals of *all* types tend to occur primarily behind

closed doors—in the pages of journals read only by other professionals or in conferences attended only by like-minded others. Similar to family members in a traditional sense, members of professional groups are reluctant to publicly air their “dirty laundry.”

The chapters in this volume are written by individuals who are members of the professional family of experts on family violence. This group is composed of people who have taken on the various tasks of researching, writing about, and intervening in this violence. Members of this group are a family in a sense that we share common goals—in one way or another, all want to change some aspect of how the public evaluates and responds to family violence. This also is a family in the sense that all are engaged in a joint enterprise, in which the efforts of each person often can influence the work of others. As with families in a traditional sense, we do not all agree. Such controversy should be expected.

❖ SOURCES OF CONTROVERSY

There are multiple sources of controversy among family violence experts. First and most simply, public and scholarly attention to this violence has a relatively short history. Only four decades have passed since child abuse first received particular attention; it has been only during the past three decades that wife abuse and elder abuse have been specific topics of concern, and most social service interventions have an even shorter history. Making sense of any social problem is difficult; something as complex as family violence cannot be understood, much less resolved, in the short span of a few decades. Regrettably, it is only in fiction—including that presented through the mass media—that human troubles are easily understood and quickly fixed.

The complexity of family violence and the many questions it raises also have drawn the attention of people who approach their work from different perspectives and with different goals. Authors of chapters in this volume use frameworks as diverse as psychology, sociology, political science, law, women’s studies, social welfare, and Christianity. Various authors identify themselves as academic or public policy researchers, therapists, lawyers, victim advocates, or educators. An important source of controversy is that the experts do not share a theoretical perspective, a common vocabulary of discourse, or a specific agenda for their work.

The short history of family violence as a social problem, coupled with the multiple perspectives of family violence experts, at least partially accounts for the presence of controversies. Four additional characteristics of this topic lead to disagreements that can be heated, long lasting, and resistant to resolution.

First, while family violence in its many forms is an *academic* puzzle to be *studied*, this violence is first and foremost a *practical* problem to be *resolved*. Debates among experts do not, and should not, disguise the fact that the topic at hand is immediate and critical: It is about real people who experience sometimes life-threatening violence, and it is about people who commit this violence. Debates about immediate and practical concerns are more heated than are controversies over obscure issues having little relevance to the real world. The topic is immediate, practical, and urgent. So, too, are the debates and disagreements.

Second, family violence is a *political* issue. Family violence experts can be powerful because they can influence what is done to stop violence, to help victims, to rehabilitate and/or punish offenders. When one side of a controversy "wins," even if only momentarily, social policies can be designed, public attitudes can be shaped, behaviors can change. *All* controversies in this volume have implications for practical action: What types of changes are needed? Will interventions focus on changing individuals or on changing social forces or social institutions? Where will social service providers look in the lives of their individual clients for causes and hence resolutions of violence? Controversies and disagreements increase in intensity as the practical and political stakes become higher.

Third, controversies can become heated and resist resolution when the issues at hand cannot be resolved solely by reason and logic. Although only sometimes explicit, views of *morality* underlie all definitions and measurements of family violence. Each definition and argument involves making moral evaluations: What behaviors are evaluated as acceptable or at least tolerable? What behaviors are evaluated as wrong? What values should be preserved? Controversies with clear moral dimensions can become emotionally charged, because morality is as much about feeling as about thinking.

This *emotional* dimension of the topic is a fourth reason that controversies surrounding family violence can be so heated. The public image of professionals as people who are somehow immune to human feeling does not describe professionals in general, and it certainly does not describe family violence professionals in particular. In the course of

their work, many of the authors of these chapters have repeatedly seen the horrific details of cases of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; many have witnessed firsthand the sometimes disastrous unintended consequences of well-intentioned social policies. Researchers and practitioners working in this area often feel sadness, rage, anger, and frustration. Such emotions can influence arguments and can lead to disagreements that are emotionally charged.

The relative newness and complexity of the topic, experts' divergent perspectives and agendas, the high practical and political consequences of what experts say, the moral dimension of the work, and the inextricable combination of rationality and passion associated with these concerns have combined to yield controversy. To be clear, controversy is good, because this is how knowledge is advanced: Controversy leads to debate, debate encourages reflection, reflection leads to research, and research leads to refining and elaborating ideas. At the same time, for controversies to be beneficial, they must be swept out from the musty pages of academic journals and from the dark rooms of professional conferences into the bright light of public scrutiny.

Although we do not naively believe that the controversies presented in this volume can be neatly resolved, we do believe that closing off debate is counterproductive when so little is known about such important issues. There is reason, then, for this particular volume. Taken as a whole, the chapters presented here do not answer questions. Rather, they encourage debate and reflection about complex theoretical, moral, practical, and political questions.

❖ EVALUATING CONTROVERSIES

Clearly, the organization of this volume differs from that of most mass media treatments of family violence—or any other social problem. In this world of 30-second sound bites and television talk shows, the expert of the moment often seems to convey “simple truths.” Such mass media images are calming because they allow audiences to believe there are simple solutions to complex problems. But that is the world of the mass media. When taken as a whole, the chapters in this volume reflect real life. Family violence is a complex theoretical, moral, practical, and political problem. Therefore, the discussions in these chapters are complex, and they contain no simple truths. Certainly, it

would be the route to ignorance if readers simply dismiss all viewpoints in these chapters because the "experts do not agree." Rather, chapters in this volume require readers to weigh the evidence and make their own judgments about the validity and importance of the views in these chapters.

Evaluating discussions of any type, but especially those surrounding such a morally charged topic as family violence, is very difficult work for at least two reasons. First, arguments are cognitively evaluated by comparing them to existing knowledge and personal experience. People have a tendency simply to accept views that confirm what already is known; there is a tendency simply to reject views that challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about how the world works. In these instances, people tend to be not critical enough of statements confirming existing understandings, and too critical of those challenging existing knowledge. Second, feeling influences cognitive evaluations. There is a tendency to reject too quickly arguments that lead to negative feelings such as anger or hopelessness or frustration, and a tendency to accept too quickly arguments that lead to positive feelings such as hopefulness. In these instances, arguments are evaluated on criteria of feeling rather than thinking.

Although evaluation always is difficult, and especially difficult for topics such as family violence, there are evaluation criteria that nonetheless can be used to examine views such as those contained in this volume. Surely, readers should ask questions associated with the critical reasoning of science: Is the argument logical? What is the quality of evidence? Does the evidence support the argument? Even for a topic as volatile as family violence, logical and objective standards apply.

At the same time, generally accepted scientific criteria are not enough to evaluate the views contained in these chapters. For example, scientific criteria are a yardstick measuring an *academic* standard of knowledge that prizes impartiality and generalizability of evidence. However, family violence is not just an academic puzzle to be studied; it is a practical problem to be resolved. At times, evidence might not conform to academic standards, yet it nonetheless is adequate to address particular practical questions. In addition, while family violence is associated with strong feelings and moral evaluations, scientific criteria are concerned only with logic and objectivity. Much that might reasonably pertain to understanding violence escapes empirical conceptualization and measurement.

In brief, although it is important to examine these opposing viewpoints in terms of their logic and empirical support, readers should remember that academic research is only one way of knowing about the social world. It likewise is important to remember that, because the arguments made by some of the authors in this volume are new, scientific evidence supporting or refuting them is not yet available; that authors write from many different perspectives and have different agendas; that what does and does not constitute adequate evidence can vary; and that the evidence for arguments made by some of the authors never could be found in statistics. The messiness of the subject matter therefore leads to complexities in evaluation.

We are grateful to all of the contributors to this volume who have demonstrated that the best spokespersons for the various sides of controversies can and will engage in debate. Although these chapters do not offer a simple truth about myriad questions of family violence, the high quality of the presentations here repeatedly demonstrate how equally intelligent and dedicated people can come to quite different conclusions.

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