

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, GENDER, AND CULTURE: SHINING A LIGHT

### *Developmental Perspectives on Domestic Violence and the Precarious Nature of Childhood*

Summary: This talk presents perspectives on Child Abuse as part and parcel of the Domestic Violence issue. Clearly violence against women is often violence against children because it deprives children of the mother's nurturing. Domestic violence against children knows no gender separation; boys are abused as frequently as girls. Additionally, while girls may go on to become victimized as young women, boys may go on to identify with their oppressors and become victimizers so that abused boys and girls are two sides of a coin. Additionally there are many psychiatric underpinnings that can be found when examining the causes of domestic violence and these are also associated with the results of domestic violence and the havoc that it wreaks. A brief list of the the psychiatric disorders associated with domestic violence have been presented and a description of some of the developmental characteristics of children that accommodate abuse due to the nature of the child's need for protection and love from the parent or identified parent/protector figure.

I realized that my concept of domestic violence was perhaps broader and more global than the Webster definition which defines it as: the inflicting of physical injury by one family or household member on another; *also*: a repeated or habitual pattern of such behavior.

Abuse of children is domestic violence. My definition of family or domestic violence, broadly is that it is a condition covering a range of acts of violence, either verbal or physical, against any family member that might directly or indirectly affect a child's growth and development within the family unit and that disturbs the family's normal functioning

I think about girls and women of course, but I also think about boys; the boys who will one day be fathers and who could potentially be either the ideal male figure in a girl's life or the victimizer that turns her life upside down.

I've worked with adults and children in the mental health system, in child welfare, in the public schools and in the community at large as well as with the Greek American community and it seems that mental illness almost always comes up as a possible cause or a contributor to the abusive situation, and often it is an end result of abuse and trauma.

Domestic violence, affects child development and its effects reach across race, culture and gender. This is my professional experience of what children and adults have taught me about living in families of domestic violence and abuse either as the receivers or the witnesses or both.

Domestic violence knows no gender separation with regard to children. Boys experience as much violence and abuse as girls, although we know that the adult mothers and women in general are more

frequently victimized by adult male heads of households. We need to look at boys because “the boy is the father of the man.”

Frequently, there are psychiatric underpinnings that determine the kind of abuse that is perpetrated with a variety of impulse control problems that cause them to act without thinking about the consequences of their actions. Sometimes it is generational due to the hereditary nature of psychiatric disturbances. The mental disorders can be grouped as mood disorders, psychotic disorders, substance abuse and impulse control disorders as well as different kinds of personality disorders.

More than one of these disorders can present in the same individual which makes them tougher to treat. It is rare for a consistent abuser and perpetrator of domestic violence to not have some kind of psychiatric problem, although many do not seek psychiatric help and their acts and their victims go under the radar of mental health and even child protection and law enforcement.

But WHY??

Many cultures see family violence and domestic conflict as “a personal and private matter,” explaining why many incidents of abuse are never addressed in the legal or community setting and go unrecognized. We term these personal affairs “family secrets” -- kept out of the societal spotlight even if known to be wrong and hurtful.

Children are the greatest preservers of family secrets because children are designed to preserve and protect the family that serves them. And they will do this within an inch of their lives. This is a biological and adaptive behavior that dates back to our more primitive animal ancestors, and relates to child’s need to have a family to belong to, to protect them and feed them and it is probably programmed into our DNA. Cultures support these behaviors in children and we understand how powerful they are, even in the court of law. We aren’t quite sure how to deal with children who accuse their parents of unspeakable things; do we believe them?

When children recant, courts perhaps breathe a sigh of relief and drop the charges—or they worriedly send the child back to the home. It’s often difficult to really pinpoint the reality of child abuse unless there is actual physical damage. This occurred to me once when I realized that a child was in a very unhappy placement with a family member who had custody. For a couple of years I voiced dismay as I saw the struggle between the guardian and the child and the quiet suffering that the child was going through and I worried because she was still in the same household although she never made a specific complaint. Only when a small cut to her face was brought to the attention of her worker was there enough evidence to remove her from what turned out later to be a horrendously abusive situation involving starvation, deprivation, and neglect.

We speak of domestic violence as violence against women and consider it a major issue today, but in doing so, we are also speaking about violence against children, because in one way or another, they are also the victims, because they suffer from the deficits of power that an abused mother carries, and they suffer because that mother may become impaired by the abuse that is perpetrated against her; that causes her children and family members whom she cares for to be deprived of her care, nurturing and resources that she might provide.

We know that a mother who may choose a new domestic partner after separating from her children's father and if she suffers domestic abuse, she puts her children in greater danger of being abused by that unrelated domestic partner who has no stake in her children's welfare. And while we know that biological fathers can be potential abusers of their own children, it is much more common that domestic partners other than the biological parents are more likely to be abusers of their partner's children. Girls are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse by their mother's domestic male partners who are not biologically related to them but boys are also quite vulnerable to this kind of domestic abuse.

These men may not abuse their own biological children with that woman, but may abuse their partner's children. When the daughter who is the victim of the abuse reveals to her mother this situation, often after years of abuse, a complex situation may play out in a variety of painful scenarios, victimizing the girl even further unless the mother kicks the man out immediately, which she frequently does.

This might not happen in a percentage of cases, and girl is labeled a seductress and blamed, alienating her from her siblings, mother and other family members and even shamed and ostracized in her cultural community.

Why do kids often stay in this abuse situation for so long? The explanation is the one I described above; children and teens instinctively know that revealing this kind of thing will expose their parent and endanger their position in the family. On top of this, we know that the predators who stalk these girls are savvy enough to warn the girls of all the possible ways that they will be harmed if they reveal this traumatic situation. For most girls that I have worked with who have had this problem, even worse than the abuse, they tell me, is the alienation from their siblings and family, and even from the mother who accuses them. It is a twisted turn of fate that furthers the abuse towards an already terribly damaged girl.

In the foster care system, in cases where there may be inadequate oversight by placement agencies, we see that sexual and physical abuse is common and oftentimes overlooked. Children do not come forward because of the fear of yet another placement or because they might leave behind another sibling in the same placement. The desire to protect and preserve whatever family is left, is often the fuel that drives children to suffer and tolerate abuse. Shame, embarrassment and a familiarity with the condition of being abused often play a role in perpetuating these situations and further victimizing the children who have already been through so much.

Children victimized physically in any way, may also be children who already have behavior problems that are well known to their families and schools. When they reveal abuse in any of these settings, they are often blamed, directly or indirectly because they are considered untrustworthy and problematic. In fact, children with behavior problems may be targeted as victims in foster homes and in facilities by those potential perpetrators who know the system well and know that if the child makes a complaint or report, that their truthfulness will be doubted and often such crimes against children go unpunished or as the child welfare system terms them, “unfounded.”

All the children mentioned above may be potential victims of domestic violence in adulthood, because that’s what they know. They are the victims of tomorrow. In order to stop domestic violence and abuse, we need to stop not only violence against women, but violence against children.

Our society is also becoming more and more aware of the violence of children towards other children. The whole anti-bullying trend in our society is a healthy realization that this kind of behavior is damaging to children who are victimized and often leads to social impairment and even suicide. While bullying is not domestic violence, it has implications for the child perpetrators in their own families-- that do not recognize their harmful behaviors and do not correct them. It was most recently noted in a study discussed on television that sexual assault by children against children is on the rise, and urgently needs to be addressed.

UNICEF has recently begun a campaign with Liam Neeson, regarding the “invisible” phenomenon of violence against children. It appears that the world is realizing that violence against children is as important an issue as violence against women. In fact they are all tied together.

The damage done by any form of abuse cannot be measured and is never to be condoned. It leaves permanent marks on all those it affects, in many different ways, and in many forms. Harsh words, language, and mean-spirited behaviors that disturb us in our families, in turn, reach our schools and neighborhoods. Children internalize and try to deal with these experiences, acting out dangerous and violent scenarios and sometimes victimizing others.

Violence against children affects a host of brain functions, including self regulation, attention, concentration, emotional control, learning centers, including speech and hearing. Studies of the brain in brain scans illustrate the anatomical changes to the brain that result from trauma and violence. There is also evidence that neuromuscular damage can result from the trauma of abuse and of course, of physical abuse, including traumatic brain injury of which we are all familiar because of its publicity with regard to football and war injuries. The range of damage is huge.

Domestic violence is well entrenched in our culture and the lives of many children and families, and shapes all of our lives to some degree. Some years ago, a dear college friend and writer, Hannah Magram, reminded me of how dominant the themes of child abuse and domestic violence are in great and famous

works of literature, especially concerning children; Cinderella, Oliver Twist, Harry Potter, Mother Goose, The Brothers Grimm all reflect the precariousness of childhood. Abuse is all around us we deal with it on a daily basis; in perhaps our own memories of childhood, in the news, and on the police blotters.

What does it do to children? I have a few theories.

One of my theories is that some children that grow up and do not get adequate exposure to the concepts of abuse and violence in any degree may develop a naïveté about it, and do not know how to handle it if and when they see and experience it later in life. This may account for the unexplained phenomenon of innocent individuals being seduced and charmed away from their good families and excellent backgrounds into a life of involvement in very difficult and dangerous situations. Their defenses and awareness are not good.

We do know that children who grow up with too much violence are overwhelmed and damaged by it, and we have found that different parts of the brain can be visualized to have suffered insults. Self regulation and intellectual development are very impaired by this damage. Mental illness can be induced especially if there is a predisposition or family history.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder but also anxiety disorders, mood disorders and even psychosis may result from trauma and abuse. There is much to say about the mental illnesses associated with domestic violence that requires more time and another venue, so I will leave it at that.

On a more hopeful note, I also want to talk about adaptive resources in children who manage to survive abuse of varying degrees because of resilience and the ability to develop coping skills. Children exposed to abuse and/or violence might have at least one loving parent or family member who supports them and protects them and shows them how to survive or they might even figure things out themselves. These children may learn even *perhaps*, to overcome the trauma and use the experience to protect themselves and others by making some sense of it.

In a magazine interview of Salma Hayek recently she spoke of how in her teenage years, in Vera Cruz, Mexico, she and her father were taking a walk and witnessed a couple arguing and the man was beating the woman violently. Outraged, Ms. Hayek's father stepped in to defend the woman and she began beating him back, declaring "My husband can beat me anytime he wants!" Even decades later, this event shocks her but also inspired her to be an advocate for women in many forums and she has traveled the world doing so. Ms. Hayek is a Mexican woman with a Lebanese paternal grandfather set herself apart from the cultural stereotypes, inspired by her father's act of kindness and concern.

I have witnessed on many occasions, children who are very accustomed to their parent's domestic abuse and verbal violence that they prefer it to a peaceful, calm home with strangers; i.e. foster parents. The loud, frightening behavior of some households, that might truly terrorize many of us, is often what these

children prefer, and have adapted to, because it is what they know and it is how they associate to home and parental love, which seems to be in there, somewhere.

These children have learned the coping skills that help them to survive and sort through that environment of hostility with the abusive parent and choose it. Even the kindest of foster parents cannot reach or convince a child to stay away from the abusive parent. This happens all the time and it is not healthy, but it is a reality.

Some children suffer and are victimized and can't escape. But others may find the resilience to ignore and cope and adapt, finding ways to avoid being targeted. They focus on the perhaps sparse moments of positive love that they receive from the functioning parent or the parent in his or her better moods, and block out the unpleasant and harmful aspects. It is truly remarkable how this occurs and certainly these children suffer the scars in spite of their ability to survive.

We end up reading about these kinds of situations in fairy tales and in the biographies of famous people and we know that they happen everywhere.

Recently, I heard Sir Patrick Stewart of Shakespearean and Star Trek fame, comment on his own response to his abusive and alcoholic father when an interviewer on television reminded him of his sad history. He responded "Yes, he was. And I hated him for that. But I also wanted to adore him, too. And I know that a lot of what I did early on in my career -- and still possibly what I do now -- is somehow in some way to please him."

Although he spent a greater part of his youth defending his mother against his abusive father, Sir Patrick still wanted to "channel him" and "to adore him." Strange, right? Yes and no. He ardently admired his father, a military man, and said he "channeled his father in shaping and embodying the character of Captain Picard, also a professional military man in some sense. He took characteristics of his father that were admirable and emulated them. Who can argue with that? He was able to sort through the positives and negatives and selected what he could use to model and to make his life meaningful and to even commemorate the life of his father.

So it seems that the development of children can be forged in an environment of kindness—and sometimes unfortunately in a climate of abuse, which continues to affect them throughout their lives. It seems fairly certain that Mr. Stewart's father was never sent to jail nor was Sir Patrick ever removed from his father's care and he learned to adapt to a very sad and stressful environment.

We know very well that a certain amount of abuse is tolerated in our society, that verbal violence and physical violence often go hand in hand, and unfortunately, we know that mental and verbal violence are most often not exposed and reported. Our society legally allows some physical violence; the act of spanking children and certain other types of child discipline and oppression are legal.

We think we are one of the more advanced societies regarding child welfare, (although it is likely that Scandinavia probably has a better handle on this than we do) but there is little that we can do as a society to monitor the everyday kinds of domestic abuse against children because it is so common, and all we can really do is teach parents about the harm it causes and suggest they not do it, and make children aware through public consciousness-raising.

We especially owe it to children because children grow to be adults and spread awareness to their own families as they become parents and role models and participate in our society. Yet children have little power or political clout to make their perspective known and we must do it for them.

We know that domestic violence damages the brain and body when it is physical or mental, overwhelming, and persistent. We know that children and families all over the world suffer hugely from this problem of domestic abuse, violence and neglect; whether it is the witnessing of child beating, or wife-beating in patriarchal societies, the early marriage of children, or the human trafficking propagated by families in poverty stricken areas of the world, and that has become a scourge right here and is alive and well in our own New York City.

Even the existence of war, which ravages families and whole societies all over the world, destroying families and whole societies, might be called domestic violence; Might we call war torn societies the victims of domestic violence on a global scale? Perhaps we can and should.