

Understanding Family Violence from a Societal Perspective

Family: Haven or Nightmare?

Mark¹ loved to watch the sun rise in the morning. It was the only time he felt safe and at peace with the world. Even though he was only eight years old, he had not missed a sunrise for as long as he could remember. He was reluctant to drag himself out of bed because he knew what the day had to offer: a meagre breakfast of toast and peanut butter or maybe just plain toast, getting dressed in his old raggedy clothing and going to school where he would hide in the farthest corner of the schoolyard and try to be as inconspicuous as possible so the other kids would not pick on him. He would watch the other children playing, as he did every day, fervently wishing he could have nice, new, clean clothing like them, craving the kind of life he imagined they had at home with parents who loved and cared about them, mothers who hugged and kissed them, and fathers who played with them. That was all Mark wanted out of life: parents who loved and cared about him. But all he had to go home to were parents who ignored him when they were not abusing him and who otherwise fought, partied and did drugs. Mark had vague memories of his father poking him with a sharp instrument, after which everything would go black. He knew he had been taken away from time to time but he had no recollection of what happened to him during those times; he just knew that it was something he did not want to remember.

As he grew older, Mark learned to be tough so that he could intimidate anyone who might want to harm him. He became known as a “problem” child because his pent-up anger would explode from time to time and he would go wild. His mother eventually kicked him out of the home. He was able to move in with his girlfriend until

2 Family Violence

that relationship ended, devastating him and adding to his anger at the world. Mark attempted suicide a number of times, and he would do crazy, dangerous things, secretly hoping that God would release him from his misery. Having nowhere to live, Mark ended up on the street. He was lucky, though, because he wound up going to a youth centre before he ended up either in custody or in the grave; there he met a counsellor who genuinely cared about him and saw potential in him, despite the tough, wild exterior. He certainly did not trust her at first because he had learned early in his life that others were more likely to try to hurt him than help him. He could not understand why this counsellor thought he had any worth as a human being; after all, he had been told all his life that he was no good. Eventually, however, Mark came to trust her and began to turn his life around, first getting himself a job and then returning to high school to finish his secondary education so that he could go on to university. For the first time in his life, Mark had a future he could look forward to.

Mark's story is a reasonably typical one when it comes to street kids. These are not rebellious teens determined to defy their parents, as many middle-class Canadians believe; they are young people who have known nothing but abuse and deprivation all their lives. Their parents are impoverished individuals who probably suffered the same sort of abuse and misery in their own lives; they are passing on the legacy of their own youth to their children. These are the adolescents that middle-class Canadians often fear — and rightly so. In many cases, without adequate education (often unable to read or write beyond the most elementary level), they have little opportunity to get well-paid jobs. Compounded by their inability to obtain welfare because of government cutbacks or by their homelessness, these adolescents' situations may leave them with no alternative but to turn to a life of crime to survive.

Nevertheless, Mark's story is undeniably sad. It tugs at the heart-strings to think of a small child suffering the way he did. It puts a human face on the social issue of child and adolescent abuse. Meeting Mark makes it all the more tragic because one can see immediately that he is not a "bad seed." He could be anybody's son. He has the same hopes and dreams for his life as any other young man his age. Rather, Mark is a victim — or, more appropriately, a *survivor*. He might not be around today to talk about his life if it were not for caring Canadians responding to the problem of family violence in our society. These are the same Canadians who recognize that while the family may be a warm and loving place for many children, for

Understanding Family Violence from a Societal Perspective 3

some it is nothing more than a nightmarish trap from which to flee or, worse yet, from which they are forcibly expelled by parents who simply do not want them. Such Canadians are still in the minority. The majority of Canadians are, as yet, insufficiently informed of the social dimensions of family violence and how these dimensions operate in this society.

Family violence is a subject that a lot of people find unfathomable and repugnant at the same time. Both reactions generally stem from the belief that the family is a “haven in a heartless world” (Lasch 1977) where the members love one another unconditionally and support one another at all times, a place where people retreat to escape the harshness and alienation of the world. If we believe such things about the family, we are then more horrified to discover that in many families individuals are beaten, threatened, humiliated and sexually assaulted. The usual response is to convince ourselves that the people perpetrating such acts of violence must be “sick” and ought to be “locked up.” If the victim² is an adult, the inevitable question is then “Why doesn’t she or he leave?” These responses assume that if social authorities imprison perpetrators or victims leave, the violence will disappear or decrease significantly. They ignore the fact that family violence has a rather long and persistent history.

How can the family be a place of violence? Gelles and Straus (1979), the two “fathers” of the sociology of family violence, list eleven traits of the family that contribute to its violent character. These traits include the amount of time family members spend with one another, the intensity of their interactions due to their emotional ties, the range of activities in which family members engage and the intermingling of different generations and sexes. Ironically, other analysts (Straus and Hotaling 1979) suggest that these same traits can also make the family a loving milieu.

The bittersweet irony of such traits is that intimacy and intensity may lead to love *and* violence. This twofold reality demonstrates how violence can take place within a close, loving environment. While family members may draw comfort from one another and give support, they may also prey on one another. Sharing joy and venting frustration may go hand-in-hand within the family fold.

Yet, other research suggests that abusive family relations differ from non-abusive family relations in ways that do not directly pertain to violence. Majonis (1995) argues that family members in abusive families tend to be more isolated from one another than in non-

4 *Family Violence*

abusive families. This means that, rather than engaging in cooperative and interactive activities, the members of abusive families perform tasks and activities that do not involve one another, even though they take place within the home. Watching television is a prototype of this behaviour. Family members who are isolated by such activities tend to be more coercive in their relations with one another, presumably because any bond among them has been weakened by prolonged isolation and increased distance in their interrelations with the family. Conflict may ensue and escalate, as may aggression. There is more social interaction and mutual decision-making among members of non-abusive families. These observations, which appear to contradict Gelles and Straus's position, suggest that the amount of time spent together and the range of activities involved in may not generate conflict on their own; rather, it is the quality of the interactions among family members that contributes to the production of violence. If relations are cooperative and respectful, there will likely be less abuse; if relations are distant and disengaged, abuse is more likely to occur. Child abuse seems to occur when members of abusive families who are involved with one another become more distant and isolated from one another. Thus, members of families who are characterized as "abusive" may spend time together and perform tasks, such as household chores, and activities, like watching television, together, as well as alone, but the time spent together places stress on the members and that stress leads to aggression and then to isolation.

Applying a Societal Perspective

Yet, blaming the pathology of violence on aspects of family life does not give an adequate account of why intimacy and intensity should lead to violence. A leap in logic is required to bind the two concepts together. Therefore, we must explore other possible reasons for the occurrence of violence. To do so, we must broaden our focus, take our eyes off the particular individual, family or, for that matter, social institution. By keeping our focus narrow, we inadvertently preserve the popular myth of the family: the family-as-haven and the street-as-threat. This way of thinking allows us to continue to believe that family violence is a private matter, rather than a social one. Our focus must shift to the social context in which the family is embedded.

We can accomplish the task of viewing the social context and its relation to violence within families by using what the

Understanding Family Violence from a Societal Perspective 5

sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) termed the sociological imagination. In essence, what this means is that we must understand that personal biographies are linked to history. To put it another way, we as individuals live out our lives in a particular time and place, otherwise known as a historical period. What happens, and has happened, in the world around us (that is, historically) influences our personal histories by constraining us or allowing us to accomplish things that at other times and in other places would have been impossible. For example, anyone born after World War II in Canada and coming of age in the 1960s would be more likely to go to university than previous generations because of social and economic changes that made education more accessible. The need for a highly skilled workforce meant that the government and parents encouraged more young people to get a university education. Furthermore, there were greater financial gains for those with advanced qualifications. New universities were built and old ones were expanded (Granatstein et al. 1983: 371). These historical changes profoundly influenced the personal history of that and subsequent generations.

We must take an intellectual step back to view our life histories within their context and to understand how one influences the other. In this way, we are able to recognize that what is happening to us in our personal lives is tied to what is happening in the world around us. Our private troubles are often linked to public issues. When we move between our personal biographies and the social-historical context of our lives, we are exercising our sociological imaginations. This unique perspective helps us understand that family violence is a social phenomenon, not a private matter. Violence is not inherent in individuals and their psyches, nor in particular families, but in the nature of relationships.

In addition, we must address the *gendered* nature of family violence. Prominent social researchers are often silent on the matter of gender, presenting their analyses in neutral terms. Such a presentation implies that both men and women are equally violent. Statistics, however, show that such a portrait of family violence is quite erroneous. There is so much of a gender imbalance when it comes to family violence that some researchers argue that “family violence” should rightfully be renamed “male violence.” Not only are males largely responsible for committing violent and abusive acts within the domestic sphere, but females are predominantly their adult victims. Although a number of researchers have conducted studies showing that husbands are abused as much as, if not more than,

6 *Family Violence*

wives, their studies have several problems (these are explored in more detail in Chapter 2). We argue that to better comprehend the issues involved in family conflict and violence, including the social and power relations that contribute to the phenomenon, it is necessary to address its gendered nature.

In this book, we take a feminist³ and sociological approach to family violence. We show that the family is rooted in society, that individuals are socialized into particular patterns of behaviour, that these patterns are difficult to change and that social forces external to the family itself have an enormous impact on the processes taking place within the family. We will also endeavour to answer three important questions: (1) What is family violence? (2) What forms does it take? (3) Where does it originate?

Family violence is a social problem that affects all of us and has serious material and philosophical ramifications. The material costs involve the many services required to deal with the aftermath of family violence, such as police officers, social workers, court and prison officials. The philosophical ramification is the breakdown of the social fabric. Relationships among family members are severely damaged by violence; and family members themselves are harmed in numerous ways.

One way individuals are harmed is through humiliation, which results from being violated by someone else. Such violation could be physical, sexual or psychological. It is perhaps particularly humiliating when the person committing the violation is a trusted loved one. The shame will probably be shared by both the one perpetrating the violent act and the one being victimized, although not necessarily at the same time. Humiliation will be experienced by the victim when she or he realizes that she or he has been victimized. The perpetrator, however, will likely not experience humiliation until she or he comes to the awareness of what she or he has done.

Shame, brought on by the belief that one's self is being attacked (Scheff 1990: 80), is a particularly toxic emotion. It may be manifested by people who experience violence in their lives, as perpetrators, victims or witnesses. When the bond between people has been broken or severely threatened, the response is shame. Because shame is recursive, which means "acting back on [itself] in never-ending loops," it distorts the way individuals view not only themselves, but others. In addition, it is "contagious" between perpetrators and victims: shame begets shame (Scheff 1990: 18; see also Bradshaw 1988a, 1988b). A perpetrator who feels shameful may engender

Understanding Family Violence from a Societal Perspective 7

shame in the victim. The victim's shame may result in the perpetrator feeling greater shame. Furthermore, the avoidance of shame (or embarrassment) may take on quite an aggressive character (Goffman 1967 as cited by Scheff 1990: 29). Rather than just a matter of defensive gestures, avoidance may become offensive and even belligerent. Violence may eventuate from the desire to avoid shame.

Family violence exceeds the boundaries of the family. It damages perpetrators, victims and witnesses, physically and psychologically. These damaged people, then, go out into the greater Canadian society and have relationships with others. Logic suggests that these relationships, too, will become damaged by the legacy of violence. As the damage spreads throughout our society, it involves more and more people whose relationships are tainted. Societal institutions, such as social service agencies, the police, courts and penal system, become involved in the attempt to stem the flow of this form of toxicity. Yet, family violence does not only originate within families and move into the rest of society; its origins can be found in various aspects of Canadian society.

The Violence of Society

Sociologists have long recognized and accepted the presence of conflict, as well as consensus, in social relations.⁴ Lewis Coser, a pre-eminent American sociologist (1956), argues that conflict can be functional or beneficial for society, in that it can bring about social change. Another sociologist, Thomas Scheff (1990: 7) distinguishes between "good" and "bad" conflict, asserting that if the social bond among members of a society is intact, then conflict may serve a constructive purpose; on the other hand, if the social bond is broken or profoundly threatened, then conflict is likely to be destructive.

Conflict can take many forms, from disagreement to actual aggression, from controlled to chaotic. As a society, we do not like chaotic conflict — riots, angry mobs and high levels of street crime give us cause for fear. We are, however, more willing to tolerate controlled or contained conflict — strikes, the outward expression of conflict between workers and management; peaceful rallies and marches in protest of a social problem; and the types found in movies, on television, in books, sports, video games and other cultural media.

We are also rather more willing to tolerate conflict from particular kinds of individuals or groups because we perceive conflict as part

8 *Family Violence*

of their accepted societal role. For instance, in our society, aggression is often considered acceptable in males as part of their socially defined masculinity. In addition, when violence is used as a means to an end, to achieve specific goals, it is often considered acceptable. One example is the high tolerance for, and even encouragement of, corporal punishment of children as a means of discipline by some parents and educators. Until quite recently physical aggression of husbands against their wives was tolerated. Many argue that there is still a great deal of tolerance of violence against women, children and other marginalized groups such as the elderly in our society, despite the public commitment of the government to ending such behaviour.

Another instance of a tolerable form of conflict is “peacekeeping.” Many Canadians are proud of our country’s reputation for providing soldiers for United Nations peacekeeping missions, ignoring the fact that keeping the peace in that form is premised on the threat of violence. Once again, we legitimate violence in this way. We take pride in an activity that threatens to use violence against those who themselves threaten to use violence. The threat, however, is viewed in a positive light because it is “controlled,” calculated, sanctioned by officials, not chaotic and random, liable to strike any of us at any moment.

Our eyes and ears are filled with the sights and sounds of conflict and violence on a daily basis. Popular and classical literature abound with conflict, television fare usually deals with conflict, news (in print or on radio and television) is virtually nothing but conflict, even textbooks in sociology and psychology discuss conflict. This pervasiveness tends to legitimize conflict in our society. Since it inhabits most of our waking moments, we tend to see it as a “natural” component of our social life.

Canadian society is especially violent for certain social groups — the poor, women and Native peoples are some examples of these groups. The lives of Natives in this country are often characterized by violence, both on and off the reserve. From domestic violence to racism, Natives suffer victimization as individuals and as a group (see Griffiths and Yerbury 1995). This situation is also true for many women. Not only are they in danger when they venture outside their homes, particularly at night, but they are also in danger in their own homes, where the men they love, and who supposedly love them, may threaten and harm them (DeKeseredy, Burshtyn and Gordon 1995). Sexist attitudes victimize them further when blame is attrib-

Understanding Family Violence from a Societal Perspective 9

uted to them by themselves and others if they are attacked by a male in a public setting (Walklate 1989, as cited in DeKeseredy et al. 1995: 71). When the attack takes place inside their own home, these women are even more likely to be subjected to intense scrutiny by others who want to discover whether there is any possibility that they somehow instigated the violence perpetrated against them. Despite what we know about men and violence, we are still programmed to assume that a man would not mistreat his wife or girlfriend without good reason.

Some scholars have argued that the family reflects the violence of society, that it acts as a “mirror” for the social context (Lynn and O’Neill 1995: 272-73). The family “reflects” the inequalities and power relations of the society in which it is grounded. This reflexivity would then account for violent behaviours manifested among family members. Although this characterization is true to some extent, it fails to capture the whole ethos of family violence. Such an assertion makes the family seem excessively passive. Instead, we must be willing to examine power relations and social processes involved in family life and within the violent family specifically. Otherwise, the “mirror” metaphor begs the question Why, then, are not all families in Canada violent?

Much more insidious than these overt signs of societal violence, however, are the deeply entrenched covert aspects. These less obvious features are to be found in our culture and social structure, specifically our economic mode of production (capitalism) and our fundamental beliefs about human beings and conditions pertaining to them (liberal democratic philosophy). Few people are able to identify these elements as having any bearing on family violence. This lack of vision stems from people’s inability to connect what happens to individuals in their private context to the social context in which they operate. They fail to see that the conditions of the social context ground their thoughts and behaviours. Patriarchy, which functions as both culture *and* social structure, also contributes substantially, both overtly and covertly, to the violence of Canadian society. The societal aspects of family violence are discussed below.

Conflict and violence are endemic to the Canadian social context. They are not peripheral or alien elements; they are, in fact, part of our everyday lives in some form. Most of us cannot successfully escape them. The implication is that all individuals have internalized conflict and violence in some way. Many people believe that life without conflict, including family life, is not possible — or even

10 Family Violence

desirable. For them, a certain level of conflict is considered to be “healthy.”

Despite the knowledge of the existence of family conflict and violence, the discipline of sociology was rather slow to incorporate these issues into its general study of the family. In addition, the popular press has done little to include conflict and violence in its portrayal of the family or to expose their systemic nature.

The Study of the Family and Violence

While the study of the family by social scientists has a reasonably long history, the study of family violence is relatively recent. The second wave of feminism, which arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has been credited for putting violence onto the public agenda. Social scientists studying the family began seriously to address conflict and violence in the 1980s.

Killoran (1984) points out that, with the publication of a seminal article regarding conflict within the family in 1969, social scientific literature began to come to terms with the notion that families were not necessarily characterized by harmonious relations. Popular magazines, however, did not reflect this reality to the same extent. Killoran’s analysis of *Chatelaine* magazine’s content between 1939 to 1980 revealed that of the 245 articles dealing with conflict, only eleven dealt with violence. These articles attributed the violence to the individual perpetrator, citing various psychopathologies rather than social or power relations. By doing so, they perpetuated the long-standing myth of the loving family as well as the myth of abusers as isolated and “sick” individuals.

Maclean’s June 1994 cover story, “The Family: Tradition Under Siege,” was an eight-page article devoted to the exploration of the current status of the family in Canada. Topics included the battle for same-sex rights to employment benefits and adoption, a lesbian couple raising a child, stepfamilies and how children cope with the divorce of their parents. Other than fleeting references, conflict and violence within the family were not dealt with. Such treatment trivializes the issue and suggests, once again, that conflict and violence within families are uncommon and occur due to individual or particular family pathologies.

Popular literature and the press continue to bury their heads in the sand. Aside from the odd sensationalized case splashed across newspapers or leading off the evening news, the media tend to ignore the

Understanding Family Violence from a Societal Perspective 11

pervasive presence of conflict and violence within the family. Kiloran's study of *Chatelaine* and the family issue of *Maclean's*, two of the most widely read magazines in Canada, demonstrate that the ideology of the family as supportive and loving still carries the day. Abusers continue to be treated as aberrations who perpetrate such acts due to maladjustment or mental illness, rather than as persons who have, in fact, internalized the various forms of violence in Canadian society, persons who have learned social and power relations in their day-to-day lives and which they enact with members of their families. Increasingly the popular press has become critical of "victim" feminism (that is, feminism that promotes the notion that various groups have been the recipients of oppressive and exploitative behaviours) as an excuse to dismiss violence.

In spite of the failure of the popular literature and press to adequately address the issue, in the past decade or so many scholarly journals have come into being to analyze and promote a systematic study of family conflict and violence. In addition, institutions have been established to study the problem, such as the Vanier Institute of the Family in Ottawa, and various advocacy and therapeutic groups have emerged to deal with the aftermath of family violence.

Undeniably, the social context of family violence is extremely important for an adequate understanding of this phenomenon. However, what may be of even greater salience is how family violence is defined and measured by the public and by people who work in the field in various capacities. We must know exactly what we are talking about — and whether we are talking about the same thing. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the various definitions and means of measuring family violence.

Definitions and Measurement

Definitions and measurements of family violence pose a unique problem because of the nature of family relationships. They take place in private so public officials are not in the position of scrutinizing them. There are few, if any, witnesses. Any witnesses who might be present may be extremely reluctant to admit to what they have seen, even to themselves. So researchers frequently have to rely on self-reports or official statistics.

Official statistics (such as police reports, data from public agencies) often contain what is called a "dark figure" — these are the cases that do not come to the attention of officials but are still

12 Family Violence

occurring. For instance, a woman, reporting on the violence she has suffered from her husband, may tell a researcher that her husband has struck her ten times in the past six months, excluding the numerous incidents in which he threatened to strike her or verbally abused her. The researcher, on the other hand, may consider that the threats and verbal abuse are part of the definition of violence and should be included. In this scenario, according to the researcher's definition, there would be many more incidents of violence but, because of the woman's definition, some of the incidents have been obscured or left "in the dark." We cannot know what that dark figure is. A dark figure will be present in self-reporting because people have varying definitions that are, to a great extent, inaccessible to researchers. Also, research often focuses on one or the other partner, not both. Even when both partners are interviewed, researchers rarely check data to see whether answers do, in fact, match.

Avoiding these problems requires that terminology be as precise as possible in its applicability to empirical phenomena. A precise definition of a social problem means that we should be able to say, beyond the shadow of a doubt, when "normal" or permissible behaviour crosses over into abusive behaviour. Such precision also requires that language be completely lacking in ambiguity and that it be interpreted in a particular fashion. However, both language and behaviour are highly ambiguous and dependent on their context for meaning.

Jones uses "a veil of words" to introduce her argument that the terminology used to discuss the problem of violence within the family often obscures more than it reveals. She argues that using "domestic violence" and "family violence" creates the illusion of gender-neutrality when describing violence within the family. "Male violence disappears in euphemism," she charges. Furthermore, a term like "battered woman" highlights only one facet of a woman's life, reducing the rest of her identity to one variable. It also implies that she is a passive victim of abuse, rather than an active resister or survivor (Jones 1996: 17-18). Using "battered woman" as a blanket term also ignores the fact that a woman may resist being identified as such, even though she may be enduring such behaviour.

Another point that Jones raises is that we generally tend to talk about violence in the passive voice: "women are beaten," "wives are abused," "children are abandoned," and so on. This type of terminology focuses only on the victims, disguising the identity and motivations of the perpetrator. When we are informed about the perpetrator,

Understanding Family Violence from a Societal Perspective 13

it is usually an abstract noun: “women are threatened by aggressive behaviour” or “they are battered by the relationship” (Jones 1996: 21). Rarely are we given the explicit details of exactly what was done by whom to whom. The point, of course, is that the use of such euphemistic terms makes the language of family violence imprecise, which, in turn, makes family violence difficult to define and understand.

Definitions of violence against women vary widely in the research literature. Psychological and emotional abuse may be included under the rubric of “family violence,” along with financial abuse, verbal abuse and sexual coercion (see Johnson 1996). The same ambiguity exists for violence against other family members, such as children, siblings and elders. Neglect, abandonment, denial of human needs, “rough-housing,” “sibling rivalry,” spanking, incest, murder — all of these terms arise when researchers begin to discuss violence among family members. Some research instruments include terms like “severe violence” and “very severe violence” with lists of what types of actions belong under each heading.

The wide variation of these definitions and terms raises substantial questions which must be addressed if we, as a society, are going to properly deal with the issue of family violence. How broadly should violence be defined? Is it better to keep definitions narrow and focused on, for example, physical as opposed to emotional abuse? Should we deny the definition of abuse unless at least 25 percent of the body is covered with welts or bruises? Or unless the welts or bruises are no smaller than 2.5 by 2.5 centimetres? Is a smack on the bottom an acceptable form of punishment for a child? Do two smacks constitute child abuse? If an elderly person has to sit home alone all day, with no company but a television, and wait until 7:00 p.m. to have dinner, is that elderly person being abused by her or his caretaker? Are her or his human needs being denied? If one sibling mercilessly teases and humiliates another sibling with stunning constancy, do we classify this as sibling abuse? The answers to these questions will have tremendous impact on how we view family violence, as well as how we respond to it. As a society, Canadians must decide how widely we wish to cast the net of abuse since our societal bond is at stake. Too much or too little will cause that bond to deteriorate decisively. That is, including too many behaviours under the rubric of abuse may result in a breakdown of interactions between people as they label each other’s actions “abusive.”

14 Family Violence

However, including too few behaviours under this rubric makes it appear that only certain (usually extreme) actions qualify as abusive; anything else is not labelled in this way. This could result in treatment that drives people apart and makes them suspicious of each other while they are denied redress for their suffering. For example, if just beating someone with fists were considered violent or abusive behaviour, a woman experiencing slaps, shoves, kicks or public humiliation from her husband would not be considered a victim of violence. She might withdraw her love and affection while remaining in the marriage or she might choose to leave the relationship completely because she feels that the relationship is deeply troubled and is suspicious of her husband's actions, even though she may not call herself a battered wife or him an abuser. Furthermore, since his behaviour does not constitute what the public terms "abuse," the wife may not think to go for counselling or examine her experiences. She may find herself being suspicious of other men and leery of entering heterosexual relationships without fully comprehending her own reasons. The point is that, without the proper definitions for her husband's behaviours towards her (because of the narrowness of the behaviour considered "abusive"), the wife in this example is left in a kind of "twilight zone" where she knows that she has suffered wrongful treatment but cannot categorize it in such a way that would benefit her.

Measurement is also a problem, especially when it comes to the instruments used in empirical research. According to Johnson (1996), a number of statistical sources for family violence are problematic. For example, the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey gives an account of criminal acts that have come to the attention of the police in Canada. The problems associated with reliance upon such a survey are the dark figure, which is inherent to all official statistics, and the discretionary power of police officers. Such discretion means that incidents that rightfully constitute family violence may be redefined as another type of criminal act (or as a non-criminal act), thus obscuring actual events.

Family violence is especially prone to underreporting because the family is considered to be a private institution. The myth of the family makes victims too ashamed to report the violence they experience, while dependency on the abuser and sheer terror may keep victims from making their abuse a matter for the public record. Furthermore, a sense of obligation to keep the family intact or a desire not to get too involved in "private" disputes may keep police

Understanding Family Violence from a Societal Perspective 15

officers from reporting violent acts between family members as domestic violence.

Another source of statistics is clinical samples (Johnson 1996). These samples are studies that look at behaviours of victims who have sought assistance from agencies such as rape crisis centres and shelters for battered women, or of perpetrators who have been incarcerated. A host of problems accompany such studies. For example, generalization is difficult because of improper sampling methods, which result in samples of subjects that do not represent the population as a whole. Thus the findings may be pertinent only to the subjects of the study, not to all victims of family violence. Self-selection (that is, subjects volunteering for the study) means that the sample of victims may consist of a particular type, or subsample, rather than a wide variety. Perpetrators who have been convicted of offences may be characterized as having had bad luck or having insufficient resources to effectively escape prosecution, rather than as guilty of serious violence. On the other hand, they may be the most vicious of perpetrators. For these and other reasons, clinical samples are highly unreliable.

Population surveys — usually conducted by telephone — are used as another statistical measurement. One of their strengths is that they complement police statistics because the surveys involve incidents that were never reported, in addition to those that were. Another strength is that they are rich in detail. The problem, however, is that the accuracy of the detail is almost impossible to determine. Because of anonymity, interviewees might be tempted to say virtually anything, or the spontaneity of the telephone call could result in the interviewee's inability to recall details on the spur of the moment. In addition, the language of the questions may lead some respondents to eliminate certain data. There may also be some degree of embarrassment about the sensitive nature of the topic or a certain amount of paranoia about the confidentiality of the call, the true identity of the caller and so on (Johnson 1996).

It is evident that family violence is a complex and somewhat elusive phenomenon. Definitions change as power balances in society shift. Measurement of social relations that are so complex and sensitive is a task that requires a refined and prudent instrument. So far, the instruments that are used have drawn criticisms for their tendencies towards inaccuracies. We must, therefore, be cautious when we read reports of family violence, since the findings could

16 Family Violence

have more to do with the instruments used for measurement than with empirical realities.

Conclusions

When we look at the social context of family violence, we see that society has various structures and components which tolerate, contribute to and maintain violent behaviours. Through socialization into our society, to a great extent by our family, we learn to fit into this environment. Some of us may adopt violence as a way of life and internalize it into our identities as a way of getting through life and fitting into society. This internalization demonstrates that family violence is the result of ways of interacting which we learn and which we perpetuate because of our socialization (unless we decide to consciously change our behaviour) and, perhaps even more importantly, because of power relations. If we do not feel powerful in our lives, we may very well seek to exert power over others who are already socially defined as less powerful. So family violence is not difficult to understand and seldom has to do with the pathology of individuals or families. The sociological approach to family violence is that it is a social problem. As such, it affects all of us and is all our responsibility.

Notes

1. Mark is a fictitious character. His experiences are based on a true story conveyed to Julianne Momirov in August 1997.
2. In recent years, there has been a debate over the use of the term "victim," arguing that it is too negative and passive. The term "survivor" has been promoted as being a much more positive and active portrayal of the people who have experienced various forms of family violence.
3. The term "feminist" is applied here to individuals who self-identify as "feminists" in their writings or whose work is included in collections which are described as "feminist" by their editors. It must be understood that the word "feminist" has come to have a diversity of meanings and to cover a complexity of perspectives and conflicts. Feminists certainly do not always agree with one another nor do they necessarily embrace a standard point of view (see for example, Mandell 1995).

Understanding Family Violence from a Societal Perspective 17

4. For other sociological perspectives on conflict, see Dahrendorf 1958, 1959 and Collins 1975.