

POSTMODERN-FEMINIST APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF WIFE ABUSE: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical review of the emerging postmodern-feminist literature on wife abuse. The review functions as an early test of the hypothesis that postmodern ideas can be applied to help solve important problems that women face in daily life. This early reading of the literature suggests that current postmodern applications in the area of wife abuse, on balance, have more potential for harm than for good.

INTRODUCTION

A postmodern-feminist literature on wife abuse has begun to appear (Fraser 1990; Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg, Walker 1990; Gordon 1988; Riessman 1992; Serra 1993; Websdale 1993; White 1986, 1993; White, Epston 1990), and its appearance marks the earliest efforts to employ postmodern philosophy and criticism to help explain and/or ameliorate this significant social problem. Feminists have debated whether postmodernism can contribute to feminist theory and whether its principles should be applied in feminist practice (Allen, Baber 1992; Benhabib 1992; Bordo 1992; Flax 1990; Fraser, Nicholson 1988; Gagnier 1990; Hare-Mustin, Marecek 1990; Horley 1991; Lather 1991; Nicholson 1990; Offen 1990; Pierce 1991; Scott 1990). In light of the recent wife abuse literature, that debate must now extend to the question of whether postmodernism has helped us to better understand or to solve some of the concrete problems that women face in daily life.

This paper critically reviews this recent postmodern-feminist literature. In selecting items for review, my first criterion was that the item deal in a significant way with the problem of wife abuse, defined here as physical force used by men against their intimate cohabitating partners (Bograd 1988). Secondly, I included items if the author, in his/her treatment of wife abuse, in any way borrows concepts or theories from postmodernism *and* feminism, avoiding if possible any *a priori* designation of an author as being either a postmodernist or a feminist.

This selection process was difficult because feminism and postmodernism are terms that defy a neat or succinct definition. For instance, instead of "feminism" it is more appropriate to speak of "feminisms." After the first wave of contemporary activist feminism over thirty years ago (Friedan 1963), a second wave can be identified in the 1980s, a period when modernist liberal and radical feminisms

emerged (Acker 1989; England 1992; MacKinnon 1989; Vogel 1984). Then, surfacing around the middle to late 1980s was a third wave, postmodern-feminism, so designated because of the acclimation of this cohort of writers to postmodern ideas. This group was especially cognizant that feminisms of the past reflected the viewpoints of white, middle class women of North America and Western Europe (Aptheker 1989; Brewer 1989; Fraser, Nicholson 1988; Pemberton 1992).

Postmodernism proved equally difficult to define. Rosenau (1992) offered that postmodernism is a cultural critique that emphasizes method and epistemological matters, and consists of poststructuralism as well as postmodern philosophy. (A third component, postmodernity, refers to a period in time [Jameson 1991; Mills 1959]). Rosenau found a useful distinction between affirmative and skeptical postmodernists (Agger 1994; Flint 1993; Fuchs, Ward 1994), which is basically a distinction between postmodernism's activist and nihilistic wings. This division is important because feminists, be they of first or second wave feminism, were more likely to align with the affirmative postmodernists than with the skeptics.

I found it useful to consider postmodern-feminist philosophies as existing along a continuum. This allows the rich diversity of viewpoints in both postmodernism and feminism to merge, congeal, interact, and at some point, separate. At one pole are writers whose primary orientation is postmodernism, and though engaging feminist ideas in their work, believe that feminism can be nothing more than a subcategory within postmodernism (Flax 1990). At the opposite pole are writers who are primarily traditional feminists and who believe that postmodern concepts or theories should be employed only if they strengthen a woman-centered approach (Avis 1994). Points along the middle of the continuum are occupied by such writers as Richardson (1993), whose

work shows postmodern sensibility - blurring genres, probing lived experiences, demolishing dualisms - yet at the same time, in a feminist tradition, creating a female imagery and inscribing emotional labor and emotional response as valid. Authors of all of the items reviewed in this paper can be located somewhere along the continuum just described.

The review of the literature yielded four observations that are germane to the postmodern-feminist approach to wife abuse. First, the deconstruction of wife abuse in clinical therapy is sometimes done in a way that places women at great risk. Second, the decentering of women in therapy obfuscates the male-female power dimension in the couple's relationship, and when applied in joint therapy can be dangerous to the woman. Third, new histories of wife abuse are not always relevant to the problems abused wives face today. Fourth, a potential new political agenda for abused women appears at a level of abstraction too high to attract the critical mass needed to initiate local ameliorations. Before proceeding to these points, I will discuss the theoretical perspective that is the basis for the review and how it is both repelled away from, and attracted to, postmodern thought.

TRADITIONALIST FEMINISM AND THE POSTMODERN TURN

The literature is critically reviewed from a contemporary traditionalist feminist position that is woman-centered and concerned with the power relations between men and women. This position is basically a melding of ideas from the first two waves of contemporary feminism. Traditionalist feminism is praxis oriented, having roots in the activism of the Women's Liberation Movement. That movement questioned what it is to be a woman, how femininity and sexuality become defined for women and how women might begin to redefine them for themselves. This awareness led to campaigns against the objectification of women as sexual objects for male consumption, and against pornography, rape and other forms of violence against women within and outside the family.

Philosophically, this feminism can be traced to liberal-humanist and Marxist thought. Both highlighted the role of history in social theory and the idea that social organization could change to provide a greater happiness (Hekman 1990). By the time contemporary feminism arrived it was increasingly

understood that women's problems were tied to the particular social context in which they occur: to the historical development of the isolated nuclear family in a capitalist society; to the separation of the public domain from the private/domestic domain; to the specialization of "appropriate" male and female family roles; and to the position of wives as legally and morally bound to husbands (Bograd 1988).

A traditionalist stance on wife abuse centers on this modernist concern with the sociohistorical context of the family and particularly upon the issue of gender and power. Wife beating creates and maintains an imbalance of power between the battering man and the battered woman (Adams 1988; Dutton 1994). All men can potentially use violence as a powerful means of subordinating women. Men as a class benefit from how women's lives are restricted because of their fear of violence (Bograd 1988). Moreover, this violence is a normal part of patriarchal social relations that is expected and even condoned by culture. Assaultive men are normal men who believe that patriarchy is their right, that marriage gives them unrestricted control over their wife and that violence is an acceptable means of establishing this control (Avis 1992).

Postmodernists, especially the more skeptical or nihilistic ones, believe that traditional feminists replace one set of repressive ideas with another when they posit that historically situated, patriarchal social relations are the cause of women's oppression, or of social problems such as wife abuse. This argument, they say, only replaces the hegemony of patriarchy with the hegemony of the feminist. Postmodernists tend to avoid grand explanatory schemes ("metanarratives") and consequently are less concerned than feminists about finding the "cause" of anything in the social world; in fact, they are relatively unconcerned with the asking of questions or the seeking of answers. They reject the grounds upon which we traditionally claim to be able to know something, and dispute that the usual methods of inquiry will allow us to discover anything. They despise dualisms that have guided scientific and humanistic inquiry for centuries, such as scientist/subject and man/woman. Social criticism, freed from a base of universal knowledge or principles, becomes in the postmodern mode more pragmatic, ad-hoc, contextual, and local (Fraser, Nicholson 1988; Rosenau 1992).

Intellectual work to the postmodernist is

often "de-centered," meaning it is not preoccupied with norms, the normal, the usual, or the expected. Derrida (1978) for instance was hostile to the idea that a universal system of thought could reveal truth, rightness or beauty. This universality of thought had suppressed writing since Plato and only by dismantling the universality can writing be freed from the repression imposed upon it (Ritzer 1996). Using the theater as an example of such repression, Derrida wanted it to move away from its traditional center, its focus on the writer (the authorities) and their expectations, and to give the actors more free play. Only by going to the margins, where "play and difference" are prominent, can theater forego its decline and death. Derrida thus reduced language to writing that does not constrain its subjects. He saw social institutions as nothing but writing and therefore unable to constrain people. This freeing of language and institutions from their constraints, called *deconstruction*, reveals that language is disorderly and unstable (Ritzer 1996).

Postmodernists also develop a unique counterintuitive view of time, geography and history. Everything that is taken for granted about these concepts is now in question, including the idea that knowledge of history is essential for comprehending the present. The postmodern concern is with "genealogy," or "history of the present" (Rosenau 1992). This exercise begins with problems relevant to current issues and looks to the past for insight into today. But because the present cannot be fully comprehended but is more amenable to being deconstructed and liberated from dominating discourses, knowledge of history does not prepare societies to improve themselves; and there is little need for any kind of highly complex political activity that might seek to change conditions that have been traditionally viewed as problematic.

The traditional feminist case against postmodernism attacks the latter's relativism and its nihilism. The feminist foil is particularly sharp for those Rosenau (1992) called "skeptical" postmodernists, the nihilistic followers of Nietzsche who reject altogether the positivistic notion that there is an objective reality, that there are "things out there" that can be "found out." She points out that writers in this mode had their belief in progress dashed by the events of the 1960s, and they intentionally interpret the world in ways that have no implications for praxis: their world is increasingly disintegrating and is characterized by

fragmentation, meaninglessness, and malaise (Flint 1993; Kroker, Cook 1991; Pfohl 1993; Rosenau 1992). To feminists this thinking is unacceptable because it is politically bankrupt. From the outset feminism has been an explicitly political program that has challenged not just one aspect of the status quo but the basis of social structure itself: male privilege (Hekman 1990). Because postmodernism smashes the man/woman dualism, it marginalizes women just as it marginalizes other oppressed or disvalued groups, and does so at a time when women are gaining power and beginning to realize the possibility of overcoming their marginalization (Hartsock 1989). Postmodernism reverses the progress made by the Women's Liberation Movement and offers no way for women to recoup their losses, because of its lack of interest in using politics as a vehicle of social change. Finally, postmodernism offers little possibility for the creation of knowledge that can be applied to the problems women face in daily life. The emphasis on deconstruction precludes the reconstructing of new knowledge.

THE POSTMODERN-FEMINIST ALLIANCE

Despite the clash of viewpoints, postmodernism and feminism are not irreconcilable philosophies. There is enough common ground to suggest a natural alliance between the two. As Hekman (1990) notes, both are radical movements that challenge fundamental assumptions of the modernist legacy; in particular, both challenge the epistemological foundations of Western thought and argue that all epistemology that is definitive of Enlightenment humanism is fundamentally misconceived. Both assert that this modernist epistemology must be displaced, that a different way of describing human knowledge and its acquisition must be found.

True to this natural attraction, feminists found fertile ground in the work of the affirmative postmodernists, who believe that important social facts are "out there" that can be discovered, interpreted and acted upon. Like traditional feminists, they are oriented toward process, and are said to be open to positive political action, i.e., struggle and resistance, or to visionary, personal, or nondogmatic projects (such as New Age religion) that could be described as "new" social movements. They believe that an ethic can be affirmed, and that certain value choices are superior to others (Flint 1993; Handler 1992; Rosenau 1992).

Some contend that deconstruction is incomplete without reconstruction (Milovanovic 1995; Young 1992), that is, the production of new knowledge or a new politics that is upbuilding to society. Thus, traditional feminists did not have to reject postmodernism as a total package, and some crossed the fluid boundary into postmodern-feminism via the avenue of affirmative postmodernism. Once across the imaginary line, they found within the affirmative school opportunities for human agency that were compatible with the feminist goal of political change for the benefit of women.

Nicholson (1990) for example avers that postmodernism (in its affirmative mode) opened up multiple sites for women to be politically active, i.e., there were multiple opportunities for women to engage in struggle and resistance, and those struggles might be more effective than those of the past. Rosenau (1992) provides an example of what Nicholson is referring to. In 1988 the University of California at Irvine permitted a franchise of Carl's Jr. Hamburgers to open on campus. A temporary coalition of women's groups, animal rights groups, Japanese Americans, lesbians, gays and people with disabilities joined to organize a boycott and picket. Each group had a different complaint against the franchise, but all agreed it had to go. Nicholson would argue that such resistance is more effective than if women had participated in the protest by themselves. Crossover participation in the struggles of other oppressed groups, even if on a temporary basis, opens up more opportunities than if women's groups remain committed only to their own interests.

There was, additionally, an affinity between feminists and a movement among historians called New History, which is said to have greatly influenced affirmative postmodernists (Rosenau 1992). New Historians employ deconstruction, subjective interpretations, and symbolically construct reality; and like postmodernists, unravel texts, raise questions about meaning in a text, and invent micro-narratives as alternatives to history. The work of feminist historians resembled that of new historians in that the feminists deconstructed the patriarchal view of history and allowed suppressed female voices from the past to be recognized and heard. They also raised questions about how traditional, patriarchal history that was written by and for men minimized and marginalized women as a class and presented an oversimplified portrayal of women's

experiences.

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF WIFE ABUSE

Wife abuse, as a text, is something postmodern-feminists endeavor to deconstruct, or tear apart so that its assumptions and contradictions can be laid bare. The deconstruction is supposed to liberate the couple from the constraints of the abusive relationship by developing new words and concepts to describe or explain the abuse that transpired and the relationship in which it occurred. However, when this deconstruction is performed in couples therapy it entails great risks for the women involved.

The work of Goldner et al (1990) serves as an example. Their work is postmodern in the sense that it takes a "both/and" approach to therapy, which means they reject the dualistic binary approach of attaching a diagnosis to the couple's problem (thereby rejecting alternative diagnoses) and prescribing therapy that pursues one theoretic line of reasoning to the exclusion of others. Goldner et al hold simultaneously contradictory models about wife abuse, tolerating the contradictions and oppositions of each, and understanding how they enrich each other, how they challenge and check each other, and in certain places how they are irreconcilable (Goldner 1991). Thus, in this kind of therapy, a feminist approach that is sensitive to the sociopolitical needs of the woman coexists, uncomfortably, with a systems approach that emphasizes the family as a social system and the need for conjoint therapy to reconcile the couple's problem.

Goldner et al (1990) discovered that abuse occurs within the context of the very strong bond between husbands and wives, a bond that over time, especially for the violent couple, develops because of role reversals between the partners. The woman may have initially been attracted to the man because of his strong (masculine) qualities, and the man was attracted to the woman because of her feminine qualities. With time these initial roles break down to the point where each partner adopts qualities of the other. This reversal of roles within the relationship is one of the secrets of the marriage, part of the glue that keeps the couple together. When the couple is able to admit to the strength of the bond, the bond has been effectively deconstructed. The therapy calls for multiple revisitings of the abusive incident, so that the man may draw

multiple meanings from it. Whenever the couple begins to acknowledge the strength of the bond between them, a therapeutic "time-out" occurs so that the couple can begin to "unpack" the strong feelings that they feel for one another. Goldner's approach does not intend to eliminate the abuse, only to make love safer for both of the partners.

There is great danger in placing the woman in joint therapy with her abuser because the proximity of the woman to the man only invites further abuse. Battered women have reported that past family therapy sessions were followed by violent episodes. The potential exists in more extreme cases for the woman to be seriously injured or killed. Consequently, a lethality assessment of the male should be made prior to initiation of the therapy (Bograd 1994). Further, any rules that the therapists established to assist the woman in terminating the therapy if she feels she's in danger need to be made explicit and given a much higher priority. If a safety plan is not part of these rules, it should be. Safety plans document the man's commitment to respect the woman's fears and limits about the relationship, to comply with restraining orders, to abstain from drug or alcohol use if it has accompanied violent behavior, and to cease any intimidation tactics intended to change his partner's plan or to deny her contact with others. Separate contacts by the battered woman with a local battered woman's program is also recommended to assist the victim with legal, support, advocacy and emergency shelter services if needed (Adams 1988).

Though Goldner et al (1990) refer to the terror of the male and how his violence is a manifestation of that terror (because he is not sufficiently different from his woman, as culture prescribes he must be), we must consider the terror that the woman feels as the emotional, violent episode is unraveled during the therapy. In the multiple revisitings of the abusive incident, each revisit recalls the woman's terror during the event, and amplifies the terror that may be experienced daily as her man controls her in numerous ways, for example, by making her economically dependent upon him, by abusing her sexually, by isolating her, by intimidating her, or by threatening her (Yllo 1993). The combination of the psychological and physical violence is especially frightening, because the physical act reinforces the psychological abuse, and the mental abuse -e.g., yelling, swearing, sulking or angry accusations-

reminds the victim of the potential for repeated violence. Revisiting these multiple terrors in the presence of her abuser cannot help the woman.

Among the documented sequelae of wife abuse are cognitive distortions, chronic depression, anxiety, and low self esteem (Carden 1994). Concerning the latter, the woman's sense of self esteem is reduced by placing her in therapy with the man because the joint therapy clouds the issue of who is responsible for the violence and indicates to some women a joint responsibility for the violent episode (Adams 1988). Furthermore, the woman's ability to contribute to the therapy has also been questioned. The mental disorder that most closely describes the psychological status of the battered woman is Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (Walker 1994).

The fear that women have in joint therapy is significant and cannot be underemphasized. If the woman does not tell the truth the therapy is invalid, yet if she is open about her feelings, airing her grievances and reporting accurately her husband's physical abuse, the result could be a renewal of the violence. The threat of continued violence leads battered women to communicate their feelings and concerns in an indirect manner, which is often misinterpreted by couples counselors as noncompliance (Adams 1988).

Men who abuse or control must be seen as responsible for their violent, coercive, and abusive behavior and must be held accountable for it. Therapy must be dedicated to the changing of the violent behavior itself, and treatment must focus on the details of this behavior, on its impact on others, and on the belief system that supports it. The therapy must carefully avoid the abuser's often deft tactics of denial, minimization, avoidance, or projection. The abuser should not be allowed to describe his behavior as an attempt to meet nonsexual needs for mastery, nurturance, intimacy or anything else, or by focusing on the behavior of his wife or daughter, or mother, or anyone else in the family system (Avis 1992).

Serra (1993) was also intrigued by the strong marital bond that draws women to stay with their partners despite being victims of violence. Like Goldner et al (1990), she is able to tolerate the ambiguity and instability of gender categories. But while Goldner's group viewed battering within the context of the bond of love, Serra sees it, as many family therapists do, as existing within the context of

marital communication. Because violence occurs within a sequence of other interactions that do not imply physical coercion, she sees it as only one communication in a continuous sequence of messages that may or may not be violent. It can be categorized both as a physical clash and as the expression of the batterer's interior world. Serra hypothesizes that if the woman perceives the violence she is subjected to as the expression of her partner's inner world, and she considers the act as a symptom or a message, she will tend to disregard her own suffering and physical helplessness and often will interpret her partner's behavior as a sign of distress. This makes it very difficult for her to leave her mate, especially if he later expresses remorse for the deed and begins to demonstrate his dependence upon her. Reconciliation in fact empowers the woman by helping to heal her mate's inner distress-giving her rehabilitative "power" over the man.

For Serra (1993), deconstruction impacts explanation but not therapy. Her knowledge about how the battered woman comes to have power over her mate was gained from interviews with 68 women who had repeatedly experienced some form of violence in the couple relationship and who had been referred to psychotherapy centers due to psychological problems resulting from the abuse. Serra believed that the descriptions of violence in the interviews reflected and was conditioned by the dichotomies typical of our culture, the ones Goldner et al (1990) try to dissolve - subject/object, mind/body, ethics/knowledge. The victims' sense of guilt, so often reported in the literature, also stems from the dichotomies in the perception of violence.

To avoid placing the women in a situation where they would blame themselves for the abuse, Serra explained to them that their symptoms were not psychopathologies requiring psychotherapy, but were sociocultural and ethical problems. The women were sent for outside aid at centers for victims of violence, which were qualified in the use of social and pedagogic techniques appropriate for the cultural and moral nature of the problem. Serra's individualized approach puts women at less risk, puts the emotional and sociopolitical needs of the woman first, and absolves her of any blame for the battering. Deconstruction at the level of explanation (but not therapy) is employed in a manner that avoids the decentering of the woman.

THE DECENTERING OF WOMEN IN THERAPY

The narrative family therapy of Michael White and David Epston (1990) represents another use of the deconstructive method, and as in Goldner et al's (1990) therapy, there is a decentering of the abused wife during clinical treatments. Decentering is more pronounced in White and Epston's therapy, however, due to the therapists' preoccupation with language and with freeing of the couple from the language that bound their previously flawed relationship. Unfortunately, this decentering obfuscates the male-female power dimension in the couple's relationship, and when applied in joint therapy can be dangerous to the woman.

White and Epston (1990) proffer the social constructionist view that reality is created through human interaction and language; individuals engage in conversational exchanges that co-create realities through a process of deriving at mutually agreed upon meanings. The written word plays a key part in their narrative therapy, which to them is a process of storying and/or restorying the lives and experiences of persons who present with problems. White and Epston routinely write letters to clients or their families after almost every therapy session. The letters are not simple recapitulations of what transpired in therapy but are confirmatory of the reauthored stories that have healing potential that emerged during the session. In those sessions, externalizing the person from the problem is a counter-practice that opens space for persons to re-author or reconstitute themselves and their relationships according to alternative stories or knowledges; such stories or knowledges effectively deconstruct the original story. In counseling battering couples the therapist helps locate "facts" about the couple's life and marital relationship that did not match the problem-saturated account that the couple presented with. This externalizing of the problem enables the man and woman to separate from the dominant stories that have been at the heart of their relationship. The couple is then able to identify previously neglected but vital aspects of lived experience-aspects that could not have been predicted from a reading of the dominant story.

White and Epston (1990) apply narrative therapy to wife abuse much as they would to any other family problem. Wives are decentered persons, "individuals", with stories to tell along with their husbands. Though narrative is

employed successfully with individual women who have been battered, it is employed recklessly during joint therapy. White and Epston allow the couple to tell the original (*presenting*) story of their abuse and then attempt to make space to allow them to reauthor an alternate account that is a construction of the man's aggression and violence within the terms of patriarchal ideology (White 1986). Though sensitive to the feminist concern with patriarchy as a causal factor in the abuse, the fundamental responsibility of the man for the abuse is relatively unemphasized and there is an appalling lack of concern with safeguarding the safety of the woman while in therapy. Instead, the therapist helps the man locate "facts" about his life and his marital relationship that did not match the problem-saturated account that the couple presented with. Those facts provide the nuclei for the generation of new stories. As in Goldner et al's (1990) therapy, one worries here about implicitly blaming the woman, the authenticity of the therapy, and most important, the danger and damage that the woman faces both physically and mentally. I am encouraged that Michael White (1993) has recently begun to document specific safeguards for abused women in his Australian family therapy practice. He requires abusive men to meet with representatives of his partner's family (blood relatives) to develop a contingency plan should any family member feel a threat of renewed violence.

A much different use of the narrative method by Riessman (1992) attempts to bring women back to the center of the narrative. She analyzes in considerable detail 110 lines of a transcript of an interview she conducted with a woman who was raped by her husband and who later filed for divorce. Riessman makes no claim that the interview was therapeutic, though it may well have been: the narrative retelling of her story enabled the abused woman to transform her consciousness by naming the abuse, interpreting it as oppression, reexperiencing anger, and making the transition from victim to survivor. She took control of her situation, ironically, by losing control, breaking out of a violent relationship when she was sure that she could no longer contain her own violence. Dissection of the transcript allows us to see that the woman provided a coherent interpretation of the connections between her rape and the violent feelings that later enveloped her. As valuable as the narrative may have been to the woman Riessman interviewed, an

accumulation of such narratives without attempts to incorporate them into a model or relate them to a body of knowledge means that such narratives have little utility in helping women overcome the abuse they are suffering daily.

THE WRITING OF NEW HISTORY

New History was attractive to both post-modernists and feminists. For the former, it was a counterintuitive reordering of all the assumptions previously held sacrosanct in historical writing, and for the latter, it amplified previously unheard or suppressed female voices. The question for purposes of this review is whether or not new histories of wife abuse have implications for praxis, that is, do they translate into an action plan that women can adopt to deal with the problem of wife abuse as it exists today. The answer is that the histories may or may not be relevant.

Linda Gordon's (1988) book on the history of family violence in Boston gives voice to the previously unheard story of what women did to help themselves to solve the problem of wife abuse throughout eighty years of American history. Her purpose was to show what social service agencies were doing about family violence and how the clients themselves were trying to cope with the violence during the period from 1880-1960. She examined over 500 cases from the files of private social work agencies that included 2,274 incidents of family violence. Though her major interest was abused children, along the way she discovered insights about wife battering as well.

Wife beating was common in the case records; thirty-four percent of all the cases she looked at had wife-beating problems. This should not have occurred, logically, because the agencies studied were exclusively devoted to child welfare. But women frequently and energetically attempted to force child-welfare agencies to defend their own interests as well as their children's. The child protection agencies originally tried to avoid intervention between husbands and wives, but their clients, mainly mothers, virtually dragged the child protectors into wife-beating problems. Battered women kept up a remarkably steady level of complaints to child protection agencies throughout eighty years in which there were periods of strong professional disinclination to acknowledge the existence of wife beating. They demanded support for leaving abusive men, and persuaded case workers to

support them in obtaining separations, divorces, and independent households. In doing so they influenced social and legal policy. In the worst of times, they kept the issue of family violence from being completely forgotten, and in better times they provided social pressure for some of the solutions we have today—liberalized divorce, AFDC, and prosecution.

Gordon (1988) tells a collective story of battered women in their own voices, a story much different from the one told by traditional history. That brand of history posits a linear and cumulative scheme that is often underpinned by a sense of development or progress. Power is often seen to be imposed upon dominated and subordinated subjects from above by a sovereign or a centralized state. Websdale (1993), like Gordon, tries to correct this view by adopting an ascending analysis of power which prioritizes the experiences of hitherto disqualified subjects. He looks at female suffrage and the possible impact of women's voting rights on the incidence of domestic violence in Lane County, Oregon from 1853-1960. He wants to know if the acquisition by women of the right to vote translates into any discernible shift in the incidence of male violence within families. After combing through divorce case data and interviewing longtime police officers, his conclusion is inconclusive: suffrage rights appear to have made little difference to women's experience of battering in Lane County. If historians consider the right to vote such a liberating experience that made a difference to women, then Websdale asks why domestic violence continued in the persistent manner it appears to have done. He urges us to consider the possibility that histories that present women's suffrage rights in laudatory terms are part of the hegemony of patriarchy itself.

Gordon's (1988) work, with its implicit call for self-help, appears to set the stage for a new battered women's movement of the 1990s. The subjects in her historic, collective story in many ways remind us of those involved in the ad-hoc, ameliorative movements now underway to solve problems in just about every major metropolitan area in the United States. The example provided by Rosenau (1992) in Irvine, California (discussed earlier) is but one instance of a national trend. Websdale (1993), while sharing Gordon's dedication to an ascending analysis and the telling of an accurate collective story, does not sound a similar call to arms. One wonders what his

New History of wife abuse in Oregon has to do with the thousands of women now being assaulted by their husbands each month.

POLITICS AND DISCOURSE

Affirmative postmodernism attracted feminists because it was process oriented, calling for grass-roots activity, participation in voluntary organizations and an openness to other world views and divergent political orientations (Rosenau 1992). There was tolerance of alternative political ideologies and a cultivation of a wide variety of political perspectives, some of them having little common context and at times contradicting one another. Within this heterogeneous mix there was room for a new political agenda for abused women and the possibility of ameliorative social action. My concern about the political writings of postmodern-feminists, represented here by philosopher Nancy Fraser, is that they are too abstract to be translated into much-needed action at the local level.

Fraser (1990) contends that there is a contestedness to social policy in late capitalist societies that is manifest in the way that we speak about social services, services to battered women being only one example. She is concerned with the "social sphere" that expresses not only a particular form of late capitalist economy but also the rise of particular social movements, that is, movements outside the sphere of conventionally defined political activity. Then she identifies the increasing usage of the rhetoric of "needs" in a late capitalist culture and how this needs talk is used by one group to depoliticize policies and transform them into matters requiring expert, supposedly nonpolitical, administration.

Her basic argument is that in welfare state societies, the discussion of human needs or "needs talk"—be it about wife abuse or any other problem—has been institutionalized as a major vocabulary of political discourse. It co-exists with talk about rights and interests at the very center of political life. This peculiar juxtaposition of a discourse about needs with discourses about rights and interests is one of the distinctive marks of late capitalist political culture.

She contends that three major kinds of needs discourses appear in late capitalist societies: oppositional forms of needs talk which arise when needs are politicized from below; reprivatized discourses, which emerge in response to oppositional forms; and

"expert" needs discourses, which link popular movements to the state. It is the polemical interaction of these three strands of needs talk that structures the politics of needs in late capitalist societies.

The battered women's movement is a case study in the tendency in welfare state societies to transform the politics of need interpretation into the management of need satisfactions. Feminist activists renamed the practice of wife beating with a term drawn from criminal law (wife battery) and created a new kind of public discourse. They situated battered women's needs in a long chain of in-order-to relations that spilled across conventional separations of spheres (e.g. in order to be free from dependence on batterers women needed jobs that paid a "family wage"). This significant victory was not without cost. Municipal funds brought new administrative constraints and professionalization requirements. Professionals were more likely to frame problems in a quasi-psychiatric perspective and the needs of battered women were substantially reinterpreted.

Fraser (1990) notes several trends of client resistance towards how their specific needs are interpreted, using Gordon's (1988) research as one example. Having involved case workers in their situations by invoking an interpreted need that was recognized as legitimate and as falling within the agency's jurisdiction (child abuse), Gordon showed how battered women managed to interest case workers in a need (wife battery) that was not so recognized.

Fraser thus reinforces Gordon's implicit call for local initiatives and provides a philosophic and explanatory rationale for it. She argues that resistance is critical to the satisfaction of needs and the creation of new discourses about those needs that are not being currently met. However, her message is abstract and needs filtering. The word must be simplified and spread at the street level where women are being abused (Marecek 1993), or at the very least should be stated in clearer language. One could argue that if the new movement for abused wives is ad-hoc and local, with participants at multiple sites, there's no need for any kind of philosophy or message to hit the street: the street *is* the movement, much like the battered woman's movement of the 1960s evolved from the ground up with neighbors helping neighbors. Yet, just as the 1960s movement drew strength from

philosophic and political writings attacking androcentrism, the Nineties movement needs similar writings to draw upon for strength and sustenance. More battered women might become politically involved if they read a distilled version of Fraser's (1990) work and understood how it relates to the self-help movement that is currently underway. What could be developing here is a conflict between "experts" such as Fraser and "nonexperts" (e.g., advocates for abused women) on the street, one similar to that which developed between family experts and battered women's shelter activists in the 1970s and 1980s. The two groups need to communicate and coordinate, but it is increasingly difficult if they speak different languages, and are engaged in different kinds of political discourse.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper reviewed the new postmodern-feminist literature on wife abuse from a traditionalist feminist perspective, explicating some of the deficiencies in the application of postmodernism to this serious social problem. Postmodern-feminism was not set up as a straw man that would serve as an easy foil for the traditionalist position; in fact, portions of the new literature were compatible with the stance I adopted. However, looking at the big picture, and returning to the question posed at the beginning—can postmodernism help us better understand or solve problems that women face daily—the question must be answered, at least for now, in the negative. Deconstructive, decentered joint therapies place women at risk. Where risks are great and no precautions are being taken to protect the women in therapy, such precautions need to be undertaken now and must be thoroughly documented. The risks that currently exist are great enough to counterbalance the benefits of other types of applications, applications that, despite some imperfections, have potential for good. For instance, Serra's (1993) approach to therapy is individualized and stresses the woman's sociopolitical needs; Gordon's (1988) book sets the stage for a new battered women's movement; Fraser's (1990) message, if simplified, could spur that movement on. On balance however, postmodern-feminist ideas, as applied to the problem of wife abuse, have more potential to harm women than to help them.

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