Couples and Domestic Violence: Safety, Responsibility & Attachment

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“People are more likely to be killed, physically assaulted, hit, beaten up, slapped or spanked in their own homes by other family members than anywhere else, or by anyone else in our society.”

Gelles and Cornell (1990)
Any act or omission committed within the framework of the family, by one of its members that undermines the life, the bodily or psychological integrity, or the liberty of another member of the same family, or that seriously harms the development of his or her personality.
Domestic Violence (Home Office)

“Any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or who have been intimate partners or family member, regardless of gender or sexuality”.

Includes:
- Forced Marriage
- “Honour crimes”
- Female genital mutilation
British Crime Survey

Extent and seriousness of the problem


- 30% violent crime = DV
- 1/3 substance use
- Gender differences

UN Statistical Office (2000)

- Norway  25% women
- USA  28% women
- Canada  29% women
- Belgium  25% women
Domestic Violence & Family Safety

- Safety first – the stable third
- Difference between responsibility & explanation
- Safety strategies & signs of safety
- No-violence contract
- No confidentiality
- Working with alcohol and drug use
“Many of the most intense emotions arise during the formation, the maintenance, the disruption and the renewal of attachment relationships. The formations of a bond is described as falling in love, maintaining a bond as loving someone, and losing a partner as grieving over someone. Similarly, threat of loss arouses anxiety, and actual loss gives rise to sorrow; whilst each of these situations is likely to arouse anger. The unchallenged maintenance of a bond is experienced as a source of security and the renewal of a bond as source of joy.”

(Bowlby, 1980)
Implications for therapy

- Naming and regulating emotions
- Standing in the emotional shoes of the other
- Comforting and self soothing
- Information processing
- Transformations in memory systems
“If we are really to apply the principles of systems theory (focusing on context and wholeness), perhaps the other intrapsychic half of the feedback loop (emotional experience and how it is constructed and processed) needs to be included. Then we may have a whole picture and be able to really predict and explain the compelling drama of distressed interactions, and so most effectively change these interactions.”

(Johnson, 1998)
“Felt security” in a relationship

- Affect regulation (less reactivity, hyper-arousal & under-arousal)
- Support seeking
- Information processing (curiosity, open, more toleration of uncertainty)
- Communication (meta-communication, disclosing, collaborative, assertive, empathic)
- ‘Sense of self’ (elaborated, articulated, positive)
Couples Therapy & Attachment Theory

- Focus on attachment needs & forms of engagement/disengagement
- Privileges emotion – “the music of the attachment dance”
- Therapy as a secure base
- Supports different bonding responses & events
- Addresses impasses & ‘attachment injuries’
Working with Couples

“I had hoped I had chosen somebody who was healthier than previous boyfriends…. And probably he is the worst of the lot, bless him….”
“I DID NOT HIT YOU!
I DID NOT HIT YOU LIKE A MAN!”
Reasons for couples work

- Woman might be empowered in therapy
- Many couples already in therapy
- Couples often stay together
- Levels of risk can be assessed on a case by case basis

(Stith et al, 1998)
Challenging Environment/Affirming Environment

- Develop awareness of how actions/attitudes affect his partner
- Question his motives
- Exploring different ways of thinking
- Pointing out alternative courses of action
- Learning about abuse in family of origin
- Discussing societal patterns that foster abuse, such as sexism, racism

(Jory, et al)
Working with Couples

Scotland

Jane

John

Mediterranean

 Armed Services

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Working with Couples

Scotland

Jane 35

John 35

Mediterranean

Armed Services

5
Internal Working Models

Beliefs and expectations about

- One’s own and other people’s behaviour

- Views of the SELF – How loveable, worthy and acceptable am I?

- How available and interested are others in me, and in caring for and looking after me?
Jane: Complexity & Uncertainty

Context of culture and family

The context of living arrangements and the context of “not talking”

Violent behaviour and explanation

The re-working of power and control
John: Complexity & Uncertainty

Context of culture and family

The context of living arrangements and the context of “not talking”

Violent behaviour and explanation

The re-working of power and control
Contra-Indications for Therapeutic Work

- Inability to accept responsibility for actions
- No acknowledgement there is a problem
- No internal motivation for change
- Inability to develop a commitment to a resolution
- Lack of appropriate boundaries around anger management
- No understanding of relational contribution to the problem
Contra-Indications for Therapeutic Work (cont.)

- Inability to reflect on past experience
- Consistent blaming of others, either family or professionals
- Inability to empathise with victim or listen to another point of view
- Lack of consistency between written reports and verbal descriptions
- Inability to see professionals as potentially helpful
Contra-Indications for Therapeutic Work (cont.)

- Lack of respect for social control
- Drug/alcohol problem – and not prepared to use treatment
- Lack of positive parenting models
- Extreme macho values – no access to positive models of masculinity/sees woman as objects rather than people

Goldner et al (1990)
Reading List


