

Common Misperceptions of Domestic Violence

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There are three common misperceptions of domestic violence. **The first is the false belief that domestic violence is caused by anger, stress, unemployment, substance abuse, presence of mental illness on the part of the batterer, or a lack of impulse control.** The abuser often gives such excuses to rationalize his behavior (Bancroft, 2002). Given the abuser's many and varied excuses, it is easy to explain away his behavior due to circumstances beyond his control. In doing so, though, society excuses his behavior and enables the abuse to continue by not holding him accountable. The truth is that there are many men suffering from the same or similar circumstances who choose not to abuse their partners. The batterer wants society to collude with him so that he can continue his behavior and not be forced into change.

The second common misperception is the false belief that domestic violence is more prevalent among certain races, cultures, and ethnic groups or in families of lower socioeconomic status.

Several studies have shown that apparently higher rates of domestic violence among racial minorities disappear once income level is controlled (Cazenave & Straus, 1990; Gondolf, Fisher, and McFerron, 1988; Lockheart, 1991; Torres, 1991). Moreover, no appreciable difference has been noted in minority rates of domestic violence in clinical and shelter populations (Gondolf et al., 1988; O'Keefe, 1994; Torres, 1991). Ptacek (1999) explains that the belief underlying this class myth exists for many reasons, including the fact that lower class families are over-represented in the data gathered on the issue; this may be due in many cases to bias in convenience samples of studies conducted. This misperception also fuels overall societal denial, in an attempt to distance itself by relegating the problem to others of a lower class.

However, another myth exists with regard to class issues and domestic violence, which may have arisen from advocates' efforts to debunk the class

myth. **The 'universal risk' theory purports that all women are equally at risk for domestic violence** (Ptacek, 1999). While all victims face multiple obstacles to overcome the abuse, poorer women face additional burdens that place them at greater risk of victimization in the first place (Benson and Fox, 2004; Waits, 2000). Yet it is true that all women are at risk of violence within their relationships simply by nature of their gender, Ptacek's work posits that poor women are at a *greater* risk.

There have been numerous studies comparing prevalence rates of domestic violence among ethnic and racial groups; however, findings have been inconsistent. What has been proven beyond doubt is that domestic violence occurs in all strata of society, and in all ethnic and racial groups, around the globe (Counts, Brown, and Campbell, 1992; Heise et al., 1999; Krug et al., 2002; Pagelow and Johnson, 1988; Velzeboer et al., 2003).

Carillo and Marrujo (1984) found that different levels of acculturation led to stress in marital relationships in several areas, including sex role expectations and family obligations which, in turn, led to battering. Cultural studies of battering have led many researchers to conclude that male machismo is a variable related to wife beating (Campbell, 1985; Carrillo and Goubaud-Reyna, 1998; Heise et al., 1999; Krug et al., 2002; Velzeboer et al., 2003). Moreover, different cultural values can impact a cultural group's tolerance for domestic violence (Krug et al., 2002; McGee, 1997; Velzeboer et al., 2003). Frye and D'Avanzo (1994) demonstrated that certain ethnic groups employ uniquely different coping strategies in situations of abuse.

Culture and race can also impact an abuse victim's willingness to seek help. In a study conducted by Moss, Pitula, Campbell and Halstead (1997), African American women fleeing abuse did not call the police because historically, police were punitive

and demeaning. “Because the Black man has been ‘put down’ by the White man throughout history, members of the Black community hesitate to bring further disgrace on the Black male” (p. 444). Moreover, there is evidence of racial bias in arrest and prosecution of domestic violence cases. According to Stark (2000), “Black men and women are proportionally more likely than whites to be arrested for domestic violence crimes and are more likely to be charged with aggravated battery versus a less serious crime” (p. 75).

The third common misperception is the false assumption that survivors “just get over it” and get on with their lives as if the domestic violence never occurred. By not addressing, or even considering, the fact that domestic violence is as traumatic an event as rape, child abuse, or sexual assault, society imputes an unrealistic expectation on formerly battered women and their families. Moreover, inherent in this misperception is the assumption that there are no long-term effects resulting from the trauma of domestic violence; yet emerging research disproves this view.

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