

Oklahoma Baptist University

Graduate Studies in Marriage and Family Therapy

Spouse Abuse Through the Lens of Chaos Theory

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Introduction

Domestic violence is a practice that has certainly been with humankind since there have been families; however, its recognition as a problem, and its prevalence in the US has only in the last few decades of the twentieth century become widely acknowledged. Research has consistently shown that the vast majority of victims are women who are abused at the hands of their husbands or boyfriends, and children who are abused by their parents (McGoldrick, Broken Nose, Potenza, 1999). This paper seeks to offer an explanation of the patterns of spouse abuse, one form of domestic violence, using chaos theory. Several theories have sought to identify and explain the patterns of spouse abuse. In America, spouse abuse was initially recognized and studied by the medical profession, and primarily attributed to individual pathology based on the medical model. More recently, with growing understanding of systems theory, dysfunctional systemic patterns within the family and society have provided explanations for domestic violence. Now theorists of domestic violence generally recognize that it is a multidimensional problem that is not adequately explained or predicted using a pathology model or a systemic model alone. The purpose of this paper is to apply the more recently recognized paradigm of chaos theory as a means of understanding the complex cycle of violence that shrouds spouse abuse.

Background

It has been long understood that spouse abuse is primarily perpetrated by men who victimize their wives (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). Women rarely batter their husbands, and those who do are almost always retaliating or acting in self-defense. In addition, men who batter women generally use much more dangerous means and lethal force than women who batter men. While men run their greatest risk of violence outside the

home, women are much more likely to be emotionally, physically, and sexually abused in their home by their partner. Gelles and Straus (quoted from McGoldrick et. al., 1999) state:

Today the fear of danger on the streets at the hands of strangers is as strong as ever... And there is vary real danger in the streets... But the cruel irony...is that the real danger of personal attack is in the home... You are more likely to be physically assaulted, beaten, and killed in your own home at the hands of a loved one than anyplace else, or by anyone else in our society. (p. 470)

Spouse abuse has come to be recognized not primarily as a family problem, but a societal one. McGoldrick, et. al. (1999) state that our culture encourages male aggression. "Male violence is glorified in the media and intertwined with sports... It has been reported that wife abuse within the home is highest on the night of the Superbowl" (p. 470). Children learn the "moral rightness" of violence in the home beginning in infancy when they are disciplined with corporal punishment. Many churches in America encourage corporal punishment as a means of teaching respect for authority, and every state in the U.S. allows for corporal punishment (Straus, 1994).

Several patterns have emerged that attempt to explain spouse abuse. The earlier explanations presented focused on abuse at the individual level. The medical/psychiatric community suggested a model of individual pathology (Spinetta and Rigler, 1972) that still dominates the prevalent treatments to this day (McGoldrick, Broken Nose and Potenza, 1999). Research, however, has consistently shown that spouse abuse crosses all boundaries of social class, personality, race, education, and so forth.

Because the only trait abusers consistently appear to have in common is their abusiveness (Langford, 1998), social scientists began to explore domestic violence from a systems perspective. The Feminist

Movement in the family therapy field has urged caution in applying a systems oriented approach to domestic violence in general, and to spouse abuse specifically, due to the serious concern over the commonly less powerful role of the woman in the spousal subsystem being inadvertently blamed for her supposed culpability in being attacked by the dominant partner (victim blame) (Dobash and Dobash, 1979).

Nonetheless, as the family has preeminently become understood as a highly organized social system, systems theory provides the potential to offer a great deal of insight into spouse abuse as long as theorists are careful to also acknowledge the vital dimension of individual responsibility for violent behavior. In other words, a systemic and a linear model are not mutually exclusive, but provide a more complete picture of the complexity of family violence. Following are three prominent examples of systems theories that address family violence.

In an effort to apply systems theory to domestic violence, Straus (1973) developed a General Systems Model of violence that provided a mechanistic/cybernetic view wherein family violence was explained as a product of a system caught in a positive feedback loop. Secondly, Giles-Sims (1983) built on Straus' model as he devised a six-stage demarcation of violence based on the General Systems Model that he recognized from interviewing women who escaped violent relationships. The six stages are: (a) the establishment of the family system (b) the first incident of violence (c) stabilization of the violence (d) the choice point (e) leaving the system, and (f) resolution to more of the same. Finally, the Cycle of Violence (Steinmetz, 1977) was recognized and has more recently served as a useful and widely held explanation of the interconnected relationship pattern that is reportedly experienced by the majority of victims of spouse abuse. The cycle of violence is a repeating three, four, or five stage process, depending on the model adaptation referenced,

involving: (1) a period of stress building, (2 &3) a violent episode and crisis state, (4&5) the honeymoon and a period of calmness. Chaos Theory will be used to explain the Cycle of Violence that most abusers and victims recognize as the median of abusive adult relationships.



Chaos theory as applied to spouse abuse

Chaos theory as applied to complex social systems purports that families revolve around a complex pattern of interaction, known as an attractor, that serves to hold the system together in a stable fashion that allows for predictability in family functioning. When events from outside or within the family occur that are intense enough to alter the stability of the current attractor, the family becomes less stable and begins to look for alternate means to regain its stability. These efforts of readjustment are called bifurcations. When the destabilizing event(s) is particularly strong and continues for a prolonged period of time (period-doubling route to chaos), the family enters into a period of chaos as the system seeks ever broader for the reemergence of stability to the system. If chaos continues, the family system becomes receptive to considerable change (sensitivity to initial conditions) with even slight perturbations acting upon the system (Butz, Chamberlain & McCown, 1997).

The cycle of violence in spouse abuse relationships provides a good example of chaos theory and the various types of attractors that occur in complex systems. The relatively lengthy stress-building stage of the cycle of violence is best understood as a limit-cycle attractor for the couple where the system's movement is

beyond rest but not as dynamic as within a chaotic state. As the stress continues to build, bifurcations increase (period-doubling route to chaos) and the edge of chaos is approached. It is at this stage where the family system's energy requirements are most reasonable, as opposed to the other stages of violence, crisis, honeymoon and calm. The cold, silent, disapproving atmosphere of the stress building stage requires less energy and produces more results for the system as both partners anticipate the violence that will culminate from the stress. The violent episode and subsequent crisis that ultimately ensue are exemplified by the strange attractor, a pattern of complex and widely varied behavior "that indicates a system's search...for a new solution to a novel situation" (Butz, et. al, p. 29). Though the abuse is predictable, specifics such as when it will occur or how severe it will be, or how it will be meted out are not predictable due to the system's sensitivity to initial conditions at this point of high volatility. Chaos theory suggests that this point in the cycle of violence is the most likely moment for the victim to escape the violent relationship. If the victim leaves the relationship or imposes drastic change (bifurcations), the relationship will either reorganize into a more complex and highly functioning social system (e.g. jail, effective treatment, lasting radical change in behavior), or the system will cease to function (death of either the victim or perpetrator, relationship dissolution). If the victim does not end the relationship, the cycle of violence will move to the honeymoon and calm stage that is best exemplified by the fixed-point attractor. A fixed-point attractor represents a system that is at rest. The couple system will remain at rest until it is perturbed again, at which point it will reenter the stress building stage and begin to repeat the cycle of violence again. In a domestically violent relationship it is generally understood that with each repeating of the cycle of violence the abuse will worsen. Chaos theory suggests, and observance of abuse confirms, however, that the rate of cycling and the specifics of

abuse are not accurately predictable except that the end result is frequently, though not always, death or dissolution of the relationship.

Conclusion

Because most incidents of spouse abuse go unreported, it has been difficult to get a full understanding of the patterns involved in abusive relationships. Relationships involving spouse abuse, when viewed by an uninformed observer, appear to be based on irrational ideas lived out by pathological people. However, upon closer scrutiny, a recognizable pattern has emerged for which chaos theory appears well suited to explain. What chaos theory suggests is that, though there is a recognizable pattern to spouse abuse, the specifics of abuse are not accurately predictable. Additionally, chaos theory appears to suggest, paradoxically, that the safest opportunity to leave a predictably abusive relationship is immediately following an episode of violence wherein the system is functioning under a strange attractor pattern (thus highly sensitive to initial conditions). Moreover, motivation is likely to be greatest due to the recent chaos, and the risk of immediate harm is likely reduced due to the approach of the calmer fixed-point attractor phase of the cycle of violence.

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