DEGENERATING THE PROBLEM
AND GENDERING THE BLAME
Political Discourse on
Women and Violence

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This article describes political discourse on domestic violence that obscures men's violence while placing the burden of responsibility on women. This perspective, which the author calls patriarchal resistance, challenges a feminist construction of the problem. Using a qualitative analysis of men's and political magazines, the author describes two main discursive strategies used in the resistance discourse: degendering the problem and gendering the blame. These strategies play a central role in resisting any attempts to situate social problems within a patriarchal framework. It is argued that this is a political countermovement to the feminist constructions of domestic violence as opposed to a serious concern about women's violence and male victims. Three major implications this resistance discourse has are the normalization of intimate violence, the diversion of attention from men's responsibility and cultural and structural factors that foster violence, and the distortion of women's violence.

It is time to pay attention to those who say they get Playboy and Penthouse “for the articles.” Although best known for their nude pictures, both of these popular men's magazines contain political commentary that reaches millions of readers—more than those of obviously political magazines like the conservative National Review and its liberal counterpart The New Republic. Despite differences in packaging, all of these magazines are remarkably similar when it comes to the problem of domestic violence. They reframe domestic violence in a way that obscures men's violence while placing the burden of responsibility on women. This perspective, which I call patriarchal resistance, can also be found in books, talk shows, the Internet, political debate, classrooms, courtrooms, and everyday conversation. On the basis of a case study of one medium—political and men's magazines—I describe the two main discursive strategies of this perspective—degendering the problem of domestic

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violence and gendering the blame—and discuss their implications for the fight against domestic violence.

The discourse analyzed in this article is an example of what Faludi (1991, xviii) describes as a “backlash” to the feminist movement: “a powerful counter-assault on women’s rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women.” Numerous social issues have been framed within a backlash discourse, including the “liberation” of violent women offenders, women’s fear of success, infertility, the breakdown of the family, delinquent youth, and tension and conflict between spouses (Chesney-Lind 1999; Faludi 1991; Mednick 1989; Staggenborg 1998; Wood 1999). According to the backlash discourse, these problems are actually a result of the women’s movement.

Attacks on the battered-women movement’s construction of domestic violence are not new. The movement initially constructed the problem as a result of a cultural and structural system of gender discrimination—a patriarchal system that includes other forms of violence and discrimination against women (Gordon 1988; Pleck 1987). Political opposition to the battered-women movement intensified in the late 1970s because of its attempts to demystify the patriarchal underpinnings of violence against women. Local communities and government agencies were not comfortable with the political argument that wife beating was a result of a patriarchal society (Dobash and Dobash 1992; Gordon 1988; Pleck 1987). To secure funding for shelters and other services for victims, many shelters and battered-women activists de-emphasized their feminist politics. Clinical language, psychotherapeutic intervention, and professional social workers that focused almost exclusively on victims’ personal needs took over many of the shelters. Attention was diverted from the abusers and from cultural and structural factors that fostered domestic violence. The dominant focus on victims, not abusers, was quite different from the earlier child abuse movement, as illustrated by congressional hearings. “In the hearings about child abuse, witnesses tried to explain why parents abused their children; in the hearings about wife abuse, experts gave reasons why battered women were willing to be beaten” (Pleck 1987, 195). Motivations and characteristics of wife abusers were not discussed.

Analyzing popular representations of social problems is important because individuals draw on these resources when constructing their understandings of issues such as violence against women. The media are perhaps the most dominant and most frequently used resources for understanding social issues (Gamson 1992; Kellner 1995). The media culture “helps shape everyday life, influencing how people think and behave, how they see themselves and other people, and how they construct their identities” (Kellner 1995, 2). Newspaper columns, magazine articles, films, made-for-TV movies, television special reports, and talk shows are all public arenas where images of domestic violence are constructed, debated, and reproduced. From these resources, individuals construct their own conceptions of what is normal and acceptable. These conceptions, what Cicourel (1968) calls “background expectancies,” govern all social interaction. The background expectancies
enable individuals "to search for 'valid' explanations of 'what happened' and justify decisions" (Cicourel 1968, 53). Numerous studies illustrate how media representations and popular culture distort images of social issues such as crime and violence (e.g., Beckett and Sasson 2000; Best 1999; Brownstein 2000; Ferrell and Websdale 1999; Fishman and Cavender 1998; Jenkins 1994; Potter and Kappeler 1996).

Because individuals use the media to make sense of social problems, it is important to understand how these media construct images of an issue. The construction of a problem is important because it locates not just the cause of a problem but also its solution (Best 1995). Although there are often competing perspectives on the same problem, one particular perspective often gains dominance in a discourse. Foucault (1979) argues that the power to control knowledge allows one to control the dominant discourse on issues—thus silencing alternative perspectives. Several studies of discourse and social problems, including domestic violence, have demonstrated this claim (e.g., Beckett 1996; Cicourel 1968; Foucault 1979; Loseke 1992).

This case study is part of a larger project on domestic violence in popular media and popular discourse. I focus on political and men's magazines here because their coverage is dominated by the patriarchal-resistance perspective. After a description of my method and sources, I address three main points. First, I illustrate how these magazines resist the battered-women movement's construction of domestic violence by employing two main discursive strategies: degendering the problem and gendering the blame. Second, I argue that this perspective is a political countermovement to feminist constructions of domestic violence, not an expression of serious concern about women's violence and male victims. Third, I lay out several implications this patriarchal resistance discourse has on the fight against domestic violence.

**METHOD AND SOURCES**

Although qualitative research includes a wide variety of concepts and methods (Denzin and Lincoln 1994), I base my interpretive approach on critical theory. Critical theory works for the empowerment of oppressed individuals; confronts injustice; and is transformative, political, and emancipatory in nature (Giddens 1993). It is taking the sociological imagination seriously—shifting from local and discrete instances of phenomena to their broader social context (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994). In this qualitative analysis, I investigate how magazine articles portray domestic violence. In particular, I focus on where responsibility is assigned for the causes and solutions for the problem. The articles place responsibility explicitly, by making claims about causes and solutions, or implicitly, by including some facts about a case while excluding others.

This study analyzed articles that focus on domestic violence published in magazines categorized as "political" or "men's" between 1970 and 1999. The political
magazines (with number of articles) are *National Review* (9), *The New Republic* (5), and *Reason* (2). The men’s magazines are *Gentlemen’s Quarterly* (1), *Esquire* (2), *Men’s Journal* (1), *New Man* (2), *Penthouse* (10), and *Playboy* (4). I do not address here articles published in *The Nation* and *The Progressive*, two progressive political magazines that typically use a feminist framework in their articles about domestic violence.

For this study, domestic violence is defined as physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse that occurs between two adults in an intimate relationship regardless of marital status or sexual orientation. Although children are certainly victims of domestic violence, I did not include articles that focused exclusively on child abuse. The time frame of 1970-99 covers articles introduced after the rise of the battered-women movement. Until the late 1970s, the media used the term *domestic violence* to refer to riots and terrorism (Tierney 1982). Even after the early 1970s, articles were listed under topics such as quarreling and conjugal violence so I conducted broad searches on two periodical indexes, the *Reader’s Guide to Periodicals Index* and *Access*. Additional articles were found in some magazines not listed in these indexes through issue-by-issue examinations of these magazines and/or correspondence with the magazine’s editors.

In this article, I describe a patriarchal-resistance perspective. Of the articles in this study, 81 percent use this perspective in their portrayal of domestic violence. The overwhelming majority of the men’s and political articles on domestic violence appeared in the 1990s. Only one article was published in the 1970s, which was a story in *Esquire* on domestic violence during the Christmas season. Five articles were published in the mid-1980s: one in *Playboy*, one in *National Review*, and three in *Penthouse*. The remaining articles, 82 percent, were published in the 1990s. I argue that most men’s and political magazines were not interested in publishing articles on domestic violence during the 1970s and early 1980s when the public’s discovery of the problem was still relatively new. However, when battered-women advocates began making significant progress in gaining media attention and changing legislation to help victims of abuse, the men’s and political magazines responded. Therefore, most of the articles appear in the 1990s. Also, in particular, the O. J. Simpson and Nicole Brown Simpson, and the Lorena and John Bobbitt cases during the mid-1990s inspired many of the articles in these magazines.

**DEGENDERING THE PROBLEM**

Feminist constructions of domestic violence emphasize the role of gender and power in abusive relationships, including the fact that the overwhelming majority of victims are women. The first major strategy of the patriarchal-resistance discourse is to reframe the problem as “human violence.” By removing gender from the framing of the problem, this perspective undermines the role of gender and power in abusive relationships. This discursive strategy, which I refer to as degendering the problem, plays a central role in resisting any attempts to situate social problems
within a patriarchal framework. Domestic violence is not the only form of violence that is degendered by critics of feminist constructions. Typical cases of men's everyday violence against intimates and acquaintances, including rape and incest, are obscured in the media by sensationalizing less common "stranger abuse" and "sick rapists" (Caringella-MacDonald 1998; Meyers 1997; Smart 1989; Soothill and Walby 1991; Websdale 1999). "Media portrayals of rape are in these ways hegemonic, buttressing the patriarchy that undergirds structural inequality and sexism and the rampant rape that these engender" (Caringella-MacDonald 1998, 63). In the case of domestic violence, where strangers are obviously not involved, human violence takes the place of "stranger danger" as a rhetorical tool for diverting attention from men's everyday violence.

The theme of human violence is common in men's and political magazines. For example,

Domestic violence is neither a male nor a female issue—it's simply a human issue. (Penthouse, Brott 1993, 40)

Domestic violence is neither solely a men's nor a women's issue. Both sexes are involved in provoking and causing injury to each other. (Penthouse, Siller 1996, 22)

Domestic violence is not an either-or phenomenon. It is not either the man's fault or the woman's. It is a both-and problem. (Playboy, Sherven and Sniechowski 1994, 45)

Although these articles often give examples of female violence to support the human violence argument, they rely mostly on official statistics and sociological studies to defend their argument—especially Gelles's and Straus's research on domestic violence. In her article for The New Republic, Katherine Dunn (1994, 16) accuses the media and "advocacy groups" of abusing domestic violence statistics because they state that women are the majority of abuse victims. She claims: "We are not being told the truth about domestic violence. For starters, it is nowhere near as extensive as the media is claiming." She argues that these statistics are wrong and cites studies such as Straus and Gelles (1995) that give different numbers. She uses this research to argue that men and women are equally violent:

Straus and Gelles are two of the many researchers who have found domestic violence distributed equally between the sexes. In about half the cases of mutual battering, women were the instigators—the ones who slapped, slapped or swung weapons first. (Dunn 1994, 16)

The same strategy and sources illustrated in Dunn's New Republic article are repeated in Playboy, Penthouse, and National Review. In Playboy's "Women are Responsible, Too," Judith Sherven and James Sniechowski (1994, 45) cite several studies that show women and men are equally violent. They begin the list of studies with the word facts:
Half of spousal murders are committed by wives, a statistic that has been stable over time.

The findings of the 1985 National Family Violence Survey . . . revealed that women and men physically abuse each other in roughly equal numbers.

While 1.8 million women annually suffered one or more assaults from a husband or boyfriend, slightly more than 2 million men were assaulted by a wife or girlfriend, according to a 1985 study on U.S. family violence published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*.

*Social Work: Journal of the National Association of Social Workers* found in 1986 that among teenagers who date, girls were violent more frequently than boys.

Mothers abuse their children at a rate approaching twice that of fathers.

Two years later in 1996, Sidney Siller repeats this list of facts, with a few minor changes, in his *Penthouse* column. Other authors use Gelles's and Straus's research on domestic violence along with other studies to argue that women are as violent as men.

The same survey that found that a woman is beaten every 15 seconds also found that a man is battered every 14 seconds. This research indicates that 54 per cent of all "severe" domestic violence is committed by women. (*National Review, McElroy 1995, 74*)

Arguing that men and women are equally violent is the most significant and frequent strategy used for degendering the problem. Therefore, it is important to point out how their use of sociological research is distorted. This perspective ignores criticisms of Gelles's and Straus's research, Gelles's (1997) and Straus's (1993) own warnings about the misinterpretations and misuses of their research, and other research that contradicts the sexual-symmetry perspective.

Critics of Gelles's and Straus's research attack the argument that men and women are equally harmed by physical violence in marriages. They argue that Gelles and Straus failed to look at the amount of women's violence that was in self-defense and at the extent of injuries for men and women (Saunders 1988). Perhaps in response to these criticisms, Straus and Gelles have acknowledged that the results from their study can be misleading because the Conflict Tactics Scales used to gather the data did not measure the purpose of the violence or the injuries resulting from assaults (Gelles 1997; Straus 1993). Gelles (1997, 93) criticizes those who take the data on battered men out of context:

Unfortunately, almost all of those who try to make the case that there are as many battered men as battered women tend to omit or reduce to a parenthetical phrase the fact that no matter how much violence there is or who initiates the violence, women are as much as 10 times more likely than men to be injured in acts of domestic violence. Thus, although the data . . . show similar rates of hitting, when injury is considered, marital violence is primarily a problem of victimized women.
Even though Straus and Gelles (1995) maintain that women may be violent in the home, they agree that women sustain more physical injury, lose more time from work, and require more medical care. Furthermore, Gelles’s, Straus’s, and Steinmetz’s survey data focus on counting acts of violence and do not consider other strategies of control and intimidation such as psychological, sexual, and verbal abuse and the use of threats against children, relatives, and pets.

The sex-symmetry perspective also relies heavily on Steinmetz’s (1977a, 1977b, 1978) articles about a “battered husband syndrome.” Her articles received media coverage in the late 1970s and reoccurring media coverage in the late 1980s and the 1990s as fuel for the backlash against the battered-women movement. Steinmetz (1977a) claimed that her study indicated that 250,000 husbands are battered by their wives each year. Critics challenge Steinmetz’s figure of 250,000 battered husbands because she found no battered husbands—but four battered wives—in her study of 57 couples (Pagelow 1984; Straton 1997). Steinmetz compared the results of her study to police reports of 26 cases in which two of the victims were husbands. On the basis of this comparison, she argued that only 1 out of 270 cases of abuse is reported. Therefore, since there were two police reports of husband abuse, there could have been 540 incidents of husband battering. She generalized from this number to 250,000—a number that then exploded to 12 million in the media (Jones 1980; Pagelow 1984; Straton 1997).

The argument that men and women are equally violent in the home ignores contradictory research that indicates that the majority of victims are women (Dobash et al. 1992). Research analyses of police reports, court records, crime victimization surveys, and other surveys reveal that the overwhelming majority of victims are women (e.g., Berk et al. 1983; Brush 1990; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Gaquin 1977-78; Schwartz 1987). Dobash and Dobash’s (1998) recent research indicates that men underestimate the perpetration of their own violence, while women overestimate their own violence and its consequences. They conclude that empirical and theoretical approaches to domestic violence must take into account the fact that men and women interpret their victimization and their perpetration of violence differently and that an understanding of domestic violence must be located within the broader context of other intimidation and control strategies and the gendered context in which they occur.

Another strategy employed by magazines using the patriarchal-resistance strategy is to have female authors write many of the human violence articles. Women’s voices have been used before to resist feminist constructions of social problems (Ussher 1997). When Katherine Roiphe (1993) introduced her argument against date rape, newspapers, magazines, and various interest groups used her voice to fuel their own criticisms of the antirape movement. Although Playboy and Penthouse relied mostly on male authors, The New Republic, National Review, and Reason used female authors in key articles. In 1992, The New Republic used Jean Elshtain to challenge the battered-woman syndrome defense in her article “Battered Reason.” Elshtain argues that the feminist movement is playing the victim
GENDERING THE BLAME

Although the patriarchal-resistance perspective frames domestic violence as a human issue and argues that women and men are equally violent, when it comes to discussing responsibility for ending abuse, the focus is the culpability of women. Thus, although violence is degendered, blame is gendered. Previous studies on media constructions of violence against women provide other examples of gendered blame. For instance, popular women's magazines frame domestic violence in a way that normalizes the victim's responsibility while ignoring the role of the abuser and of society (Berns 1999). Similar resistance occurs in other media and cultures. A mainstream Australian newspaper used "strategies of recuperation" when reporting on men's violence against women (Howe 1999). By using editorial disclaimers, the article minimized men's responsibility and distanced its own view from feminists. The effect of these editorial strategies was to position its critique of men's violence against women within "hegemonic narratives of gender relations in which women acquiesce in domestic violence, feminists vilify men, and men as a group are much-maligned and not to be held accountable for the behavior of a small, aberrant minority" (Howe 1999, 153). The four main strategies for gendering the blame are (1) highlighting women who are abusers, (2) holding female victims responsible for their role in their own victimization, (3) critiquing the social tolerance for women's violence but not for men's violence, and (4) blaming battered-women advocates.

"Women Are Responsible, Too": Women as Victims and Abusers

One of the main themes that the men's and political magazine articles put forth is that women are not as innocent as they are usually portrayed—and men are not as evil. A quote from Penthouse illustrates this theme:
In the fight against domestic violence, men are almost always presumed guilty. The image of the battered woman is a firm one in the American mind. The print and electronic media portray men as brutal perpetrators of domestic violence, while at the same time depicting women as sympathetic, innocent victims. (Siller 1996, 22)

In his March 1996 column, Asa Baber uses the O. J. and Nicole Simpson case as an example of this innocence versus evil campaign:

The cant from the feminist community has been: Men alone are vile abusers; the women they bully are blameless prisoners. Throughout O.J. and Nicole’s marriage (and after their divorce), he was nothing but a cad and brute, while she was an angel. Complex human interactions? There were none. It is time for us to challenge this superficial analysis. (Playboy, Baber 1996, 33)

Articles using this theme challenge women’s innocence by employing the first two gendering strategies: highlighting women who are abusers (and arguing that they are at least as violent as men) and holding female victims responsible for their role in their own victimization.

Although the argument that women are as violent as men relies heavily on sociological statistics and research as described above, some articles include examples to illustrate female violence against men. Brott points out that not all men are physically stronger than women as the stereotype would have it. He uses the following example to illustrate the physical abuse women can exert:

But not all men are bigger than their wives. On one occasion, Stanley, whose wife weighed more than 200 pounds, locked himself in his car to keep her from attacking him. She managed to get in anyway. Once inside she shoved him face down into the passenger seat and jumped on him, putting her knees in his back. He reached for the cellular phone to call for help, but she wrestled it away from him and hit him several times on the side of the head with it. (Penthouse, Brott 1993, 32)

In her New Republic article, Dunn gives examples of female violence that failed to trigger a national discussion of how dangerous female abusers can be. Here is one of those examples:

Let us note that on February 22, Maria Montalvo, a registered nurse in New Jersey, punished her husband for moving out after she had assaulted him. She drove their two preschool children to her husband’s parents’ house, where he was staying, and parked the car out front. She then doused the toddlers with gasoline and set them on fire. (1994, 16)

Asa Baber, the writer of Playboy’s “Men” column, often discusses his own victimization as an example of female violence:

I lived with a woman who physically abused me. It didn’t start out that way. Like all romances, it began optimistically, but something soured, and her response to what she soon considered my unacceptable presence was to go on the attack. She raged,
slapped, kicked, scratched, hit. Once, I woke up with a knife in the mattress beside me. (Playboy, Baber 1986, 29)

This perspective argues that there are as many male victims as female victims because of the mutual violence between men and women. However, the female abusers are highlighted in all these articles while the male abusers are practically ignored. And interestingly, although the authors seem to believe that men are just as likely to be victims, they are rarely discussed. The articles focus on women’s violence but not on the needs of male victims. When the authors turn their attention to victims, it is in the context of female victims and their role in the abuse. The female victims are criticized in these articles for not leaving because they may actually enjoy the relationship too much, denying their own role in the “dance of mutual destructiveness” and not protecting other people. Furthermore, articles in The New Republic and National Review downplay both the severity and extent of female victimization.

Stanton Peele suggests that battered women do not leave a relationship because they like the “intensity of their spouses’ feelings.”

Quite often, the abuse victims and the men they kill seem to have been involved in consensual relationships, from which the women derived basic emotional gratification. The women refused to leave the relationships when given a real opportunity to do so because they welcomed the intensity of their spouses’ feelings. (Reason, Peele 1991, 40)

A 1988 National Review editorial used the case of Hedda Nussbaum, Joel Steinberg, and Lisa Steinberg to argue that Hedda stayed in the abusive relationship because she was a masochist. She is then blamed in part for the torture of her daughter Lisa.

If a masochist submits to inhuman abuse, that is perhaps his (or her) business. But the moment a third party is involved, we pass beyond the realm of different strokes for different folks. Miss Nussbaum, at the very least, acquiesced in the prolonged torture of Lisa Steinberg. As an adult (however disturbed), she bears a portion of the blame. Whatever deals the legal system may have made with her cannot expunge her own moral culpability. (Lisa Steinberg’s torturers 1988, 19)

Sherven and Sniechowski do not have such explicit reasons for why women stay, but they clearly state that victims must be held responsible for their role in the abuse. Although they give the obligatory nod to men’s responsibility, the main point of the story is told in the title—“Women Are Responsible, Too” and illustrated in the following quote: “If women are not expected to think and act for themselves, if their self-esteem is in shambles and their dependency is characterized as feminine, the fault cannot be laid at the feet of men” (Playboy, Sherven and Sniechowski 1994, 45)

Although these two articles are two years apart and are written by different authors, both describe domestic violence as a dance that needs two people.
Both the male and the female are bound in their dance of mutual destructiveness and in their incapacity for intimacy and appreciation of differences. They need each other to perpetuate personal and collective dramas of victimization and lovelessness, and so, regrettably, neither can leave. (Playboy, Sherven and Sniechowski 1994, 45)

The pathology of any abusive relationship includes a victim who is deeply infatuated with the process. That is part of the sickness, and it's one of the reasons the victim finds it so difficult to disengage from the dance. This is one truth about domestic violence that we do not want to hear: It takes two to tango. Domestic abuse is a dance, sometimes a dance of death, and it takes two people to do it. (Playboy, Baber 1996, 33)

Baber applies this idea to the O. J. and Nicole Simpson case by using attorney Melanie Lomax's quote: “Nicole was involved in this dance with O. J. Simpson. She has to bear her share of the responsibility.” He warns his readers that some people will be offended by that statement and “will dismiss it as a classic example of blaming the victim. But her words are accurate” (Baber 1996, 33).

Baber himself was the victim in a violent relationship and reports that until he accepted the fact that he was partially responsible for the violence, he couldn't get out.

Until I accepted the fact that I was a player and part of the process of domestic violence, I was paralyzed. There was something perversely intriguing about my situation. As if I were hypnotized or drugged, I entered into a daily ritual with my abuser. But I was unwilling to take responsibility for my part in it. After all, she was the one on the attack. She was the aggressor and potential killer. I never hit her, never got physical, so I assumed that I had virtue on my side. It was a tremendously self-righteous position, and it felt good. (Playboy, Baber 1996, 33)

Baber (1996, 33) says that whether you are a man or a woman in an abusive relationship, “please get the hell out now. If you do not, it’s a decision you will have to live—or die—with.” Although Baber uses his own experience as a victim, the primary focus of the article is on women’s responsibility.

Gendering Social Responsibility

Some of the blame-gendering articles include many of the same cultural themes used by the battered-women movement itself: sexism, cultural acceptance of violence, public awareness, and education. However, the perspective toward these themes is dramatically different. Sexism relates not to feminist concerns such as objectification of women but to “male bashing.” Concern about cultural acceptance of violence is limited to acceptance of female violence against men. This is the third strategy for gendering blame for domestic violence: critiquing the social tolerance for women’s violence but not for men’s violence.

Many articles discuss why society does not hold women responsible for their violence. One theory put forth says that there are two sets of rules concerning violence. Brott supports this idea:
When it comes to domestic violence, society seems to have one set of rules for men and another for women. Perhaps it’s because we have been socialized to view women’s violence as somehow less “real” (and consequently more acceptable) than men’s violence. (Penthouse, Brott 1993, 34)

Brott argues that our society teaches girls that it is OK to be physically violent and that people applaud women striking back.

Women are subtly encouraged to be more violent. Dr. Straus found that “a large number of girls have been told by their mothers, ‘If he gets fresh, slap him.’” Images of women kicking, punching, and slapping men with complete impunity are not only widespread in movies, TV, and books, but the viewer’s or reader’s reaction is usually, “Good for her.” (Penthouse, Brott 1993, 34)

On the other hand, men are told to “never hit a girl” and if they are hit to “take it like a man.” Brott argues that this type of socialization leads male victims of abuse to not protect themselves. Because of how men are socialized, they are reluctant to report being victims of abuse. “Men are trained not to ask for help, and a man’s not being able to solve his own problems is seen as a sign of weakness” (Brott 1993, 32). Brott gives an example of how male victims are treated when they do come forward:

Take Skip, who participated in a program on domestic violence aired on the short-lived Jesse Jackson show in 1991. Skip related how his wife repeatedly hit him and attacked him with knives and scissors. The audience’s reaction was exactly what male victims who go public fear most—laughter and constant, derisive snickering. Even when they are severely injured, men will go to great lengths to avoid telling anyone what they’ve been through. (Penthouse, Brott 1993, 32)

Most of the articles suggest that to stop domestic violence, society must acknowledge and hold female abusers accountable. In the following quote, women are singled out as needing to be held responsible:

The women’s movement claims that its goal is equal rights for women. Women, therefore, should share responsibility for their behavior and their contribution to domestic violence. Only the truth will stop the epidemic of violence that is destroying our families and our nation. (Playboy, Sherven and Sniechowski 1994, 45)

This perspective is right in that female violence should be taken seriously. However, it should not be used only as a strategy to obscure male violence. These men’s and political magazines continue to ignore the male abuser and the cultural and structural context that tolerates male violence. They point out the cultural context that tolerates female violence without providing a similar analysis for the tolerance of male violence.
Blaming Battered-Women Advocates

The fourth main strategy for gendering the blame is blaming battered-women advocates. These advocates are accused of spreading myths and false statistics, abusing the justice system and discriminating against men, promoting a male-bashing campaign and failing to accept equal responsibility for stopping women’s violence.

In a *Penthouse* article, Siller (1986, 26) argues that social institutions—inspired by feminists—are unfairly accusing men of being the sole perpetrators of domestic violence and ignoring the men who are victims: “Pigeonholing men as aggressive, animalistic, and brutish, these feminist-inspired cabals broadly and unjustly accuse men of being the sole perpetrators of domestic violence.” Ten years later, Wendy McElroy (1995, 74) broadens Siller’s argument by accusing “radical feminists” of using domestic violence and rape to create a “new jurisprudence that assesses guilt and imposes punishment based on gender.” McElroy claims that men’s rights are being violated in this fight against rape and domestic violence:

> This sort of injustice is the inevitable consequence of treating men as a separate and antagonistic class, rather than as individuals who share the same humanity as women. Men are not monsters. They are our fathers, brothers, sons, husbands, and lovers. They should not be made to stand before a legal system that presumes their guilt. (*National Review*, McElroy 1995, 88)

Battered-women advocates are accused of abusing justice by playing the “victim card.” In an article in *The New Republic*, Elshtain (1992, 25) points out that “As Nietzsche himself observed, the flip side of an urge to dominate is an urge to submit and then to construe victimization as a claim to privilege.” She argues that in the “social world of the radical feminists” battered women are constantly defined as “victimized, deformed, and mutilated.” By portraying herself as a victim, she “seeks to attain power through depictions of her victimization.”

> The voice of the victim gains not only privilege but hegemony—provided she remains a victim, incapable, helpless, demeaned. This can be part and parcel of an explicit power play. Or it may serve as one feature of a strategy of exculpation—evasion of responsibility for a situation or outcome. (*The New Republic*, Elshtain 1992, 25)

One point often discussed in these magazines is that radical women’s groups actively oppose the spreading of any information regarding female violence against men. McElroy (1995, 74) says that “in the current climate of hysteria, those who question the conventional wisdom are denounced as enemies of women.” Feminists are accused of threatening researchers and others who speak on behalf of male victims. The most common example emerging in these magazines involves Suzanne Steinmetz, who has researched battered husbands.

These magazines argue that not only are the radical women’s groups opposing any information regarding female violence against men but are also actively encouraging a campaign of male-bashing. “And in general the battered-women
campaign is powerfully fueled by the radical feminist presumption that all sex is violence, and all men are brutes. Call in the exorcists” (National Review, Killing the enemy 1991, 13). In 1994—during the O. J. Simpson saga—Baber focuses on public attitudes and domestic violence with a specific look at male bashing. “The Simpson-Goldman murders have highlighted more than one epidemic. Male-bashing is a national disease, and the folks who perpetrate it have it down to a well-funded, well-practiced science” (Playboy, Baber 1994, 36).

Baber gives his readers six suggestions for facing the “current campaign of shame” being lodged against men. Here are three of those suggestions:

(2) Whenever you hear domestic violence described as solely a male problem, remember that women are not immune to violence. Statistics show that women and men are equally capable of brutality in the home.

(3) Although the female of the species is labeled as more peaceful and nurturing than the male, remember that mothers abuse their children at a rate almost double that of fathers.

(5) As long as we believe that men alone need counseling in domestic violence cases, we will be dealing with only half the problem. The stereotype of the abusive husband and the abused wife often falls apart under examination. It should be required by law that both the husband and the wife get counseling after domestic violence complaints. (Baber 1994, 36)

In this article, Baber does not really give suggestions for solving domestic violence. Rather, he targets the male bashing as the problem and offers suggestions for resisting the message that men are the majority of abusers.

Siller (1996, 22) offers an alternative to this male bashing. He calls for more emphasis to be placed on “the value and importance of fatherhood and the presence of a man in the home.” Furthermore, he says that “reducing and eliminating the crime of domestic violence is too important for our national leaders to lay the entire blame at the feet of men.” Feminists are blamed for not doing enough to stop women’s violence. Therefore, it is concluded that they are not taking responsibility for stopping domestic violence.

Finally, some articles attack the battered-women movement for downplaying the extent and severity of female victims’ injuries. Very often the authors charge feminist advocates with abusing statistics regarding female victims. The statistics given by advocacy groups are often described as lies and myths. “Like hydra heads or spreading kudzu, the false statistics keep proliferating” (Young 1994, 43). Young goes even further by arguing that the violence itself is not as bad as you may think. Young cites Gelles’s and Straus’s research that estimated about 1.8 million American women suffered at least one incident of severe violence each year. However, Young (1994) points out that “only 7 per cent of them required medical care.” She also points out that a study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine found that “48 per cent of ‘severe marital aggression’ by husbands caused no injury, and 31 per cent caused only a ‘superficial bruise’” (Young 1994, 44). Young concludes her article with a sarcastic question for the battered-women movement. “Why not
just say that 5 out of 4 women are battered by men, and be done with it?” (Young 1994, 46).

DISCUSSION

Taking Women's Violence (and Male Victims) Seriously

Many of the articles using the patriarchal-resistance perspective make valid points. Women’s violence should be taken seriously, and male victims of domestic violence deserve support and protection. But these concerns are mostly a camouflage for what is primarily a political countermovement to the feminist constructions of domestic violence. If magazine publishers and editors were interested in reporting on the seriousness of women’s violence and the need to help male victims, the content and framing of the problem would be very different from the articles described above. A 1998 article in New Man gives insight into what this perspective may look like if abused men were the center of the concern as opposed to the political opposition to the battered-women movement.

After New Man published its cover story on abusive husbands (Abraham 1998), the editors claimed to have been “inundated with letters from anonymous husbands begging the magazine to tell the other side of the story” (Thomas 1999). In their March/April 1999 issue, New Man published “The Husband Abusers.” This article claimed that 15 percent of domestic violence victims are men. One of the biggest differences between the New Man article and articles using the patriarchal-resistance perspective is that it focuses on the question: “What can a man do when his wife is abusive?” As opposed to just blaming women for the bulk of domestic violence, this article tries to help male victims. Although male victims are given advice at an individual level, cultural solutions are also addressed, including the need for churches to take a more proactive position on the problem of all spousal abuse.

It is significant to point out that the types of abuse the article claims husbands face are mainly humiliation, verbal and emotional abuse, and “deliberate withholding of sex.” Although physical violence was discussed, most of the examples were of verbal abuse. The article points out that “abuse against women tends to be more severe than that against men” (Thomas 1999, 57). And the author claims that men represent only 15 percent of all domestic violence victims. The article also differentiates between types of women’s violence:

The most common grouping are women who use violence as a form of self-defense; the second group consists of women who have themselves been abused and are finally reacting; the third group are women who are stronger than their spouses or who are the “primary physical aggressors.” This group is the smallest. (Thomas 1999, 58)

I do not want to downplay the problems of emotional and verbal abuse. However, it is significant to note that the one magazine that claimed to have done a
serious investigation of husband abuse found that verbal abuse was the biggest problem for male victims. This is a far cry from the equality of physical violence that the majority of men's and political magazines argue. Perhaps, if other authors relied less on questionable statistics from one source and more on doing a thorough investigation of women's violence, a more complete picture would emerge. But again, I do not think that is the goal of these articles. Providing political opposition to the battered-women movement appears to be the driving force.

The Perils of Degendering the Problem and Gendering the Blame

The patriarchal-resistance perspective has three major implications for the fight against domestic violence: (1) the normalization of intimate violence, (2) the diversion of attention from men's responsibility and the cultural and structural factors that foster violence, and (3) the distortion of women's violence.

The normalization of intimate violence is one of the more devastating consequences of degendering the problem. Arguing that men and women are equally violent implies that the problem is human nature or normal behavior between people without any consideration of gender role socialization or cultural attitudes toward women. And, significantly, this perspective ignores the research that continues to find that most victims and the most seriously injured are women. Certainly victims who are male need to be helped and women's violence needs to be taken seriously. However, targeting women's violence should not be done only as a strategy to obscure men's violence. Portraying domestic violence as a problem that affects men and women equally will jeopardize funding for programs that help victims of domestic violence and misguide programs and resources directed at prevention.

Degendering the problem while gendering the blame diverts attention away from men's responsibility and the cultural and structural factors that oppress women and foster violence. This counters any attempts to situate social problems within a patriarchal framework. Susan Caringella-MacDonald (1998) argues that it is easier to sell sensationalized stories of rape cases in which the rapists are "sick" rather than writing about male power and everyday sexism. Likewise, portraying men's violence against women as rare or "only human" obscures the patriarchal attitudes and social structure that underlie the problem. Of great concern is that these men's and political magazines do point out the cultural context that tolerates female violence without providing a similar analysis for the tolerance of male violence. Even though the violence is seen as "equal opportunity," this perspective helps men avoid responsibility for stopping the abuse. Paul Kivel (1992) argues that "counterattack and competing victimization" are tactics that men use to avoid responsibility. In the national debate about gender, men are claiming that they are mistreated, cannot speak without being attacked, and are the victims of male bashing. "Those with power have many resources for having their view of reality prevail, and they have a lot at stake in maintaining the status quo" (Kivel 1992, 104). He warns that we must be aware of these tactics and be ready to counter them. "If we
keep our eyes clearly on the power and the violence, we can see that these tactics are transparent for what they are, attempts to prevent placing responsibility on those who commit and benefit from acts of violence" (Kivel 1992, 104).

Certainly women’s violence needs to be taken seriously, but in a way that moves research and public debate on violence forward, not backward. Renzetti (1999, 45) points out that “despite all we do not know about intimate violence, we do know that it is gendered.” The fact that women are sometimes violent gives us no reason to dismiss the importance of gender in understanding the problem. The public debate on women’s violence is intensifying. Currently, perspectives reflecting the patriarchal resistance described in this study are leading this debate (see also Renzetti 1999; Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1993). How a problem is framed affects public opinion. The dominant frame currently portrays men’s and women’s violence as equal. More research on women’s violence is needed to help answer questions and provide a rich context for understanding the violence. This additional research is needed to counter the distorted images of women’s violence that are portrayed in the men’s and political magazines.

CONCLUSION

The overwhelming majority of articles in the men’s and political magazines frame domestic violence in a way that obscures men’s violence and places the burden of responsibility on women. Women are held responsible as abusers, victims, and advocates. By degendering the problem and gendering the blame, this perspective undermines any attempt to situate domestic violence within a patriarchal explanation. The roles of gender and power are ignored. The dominant perspective in the men’s and political magazines represents a political countermovement to the feminist constructions of domestic violence, not a reflection of serious concern about women’s violence and male victims. Three major implications of this resistance discourse for the fight against domestic violence are the normalization of intimate violence, the diversion of attention from men’s responsibility and cultural and structural factors that foster violence, and the distortion of women’s violence.

Ignoring roles of abusers and cultural and structural factors is not limited to men’s and political magazines. An earlier analysis of women’s magazine articles on domestic violence shows that the victim is the one held most responsible for ending the abuse (Berns 1999). Counseling and advising the victim to leave the relationship are the most common solutions in popular discourse. Women are told to find solutions to this social problem within themselves: “Change your personality.” “Increase your self-esteem.” “Take control of your life.” “Refuse to be a victim.” “You have the power to end the abuse.” The dominant focus on victims’ needs, syndromes, stories, and responsibility obscures the root causes of domestic violence. People may be shocked by the explicit blame put on the victims in many men’s and political magazine articles. However, most women’s magazine articles do the same
thing by telling "it happened to me" stories that implicitly place the responsibility on victims for solving the problem of domestic violence.

Holding victims responsible as illustrated in popular magazines is a common theme in other discourses. Similar strategies as described in the patriarchal-resistance perspective are found in classrooms, Web pages, newspapers, TV shows, and popular books. Counterattacks, competing victimization, and de-emphasizing gender are strategies that are used to divert attention from the everyday violence against women. A more informed debate, whether in the media, classrooms, or academic journals, is needed to uncover the political strategies used to veil issues of gender and power, and to counter the distorted images of men's and women's violence that currently dominate popular discourse.

NOTE

1. How to label the problem continues to be debated (e.g., Jones 1994; Meyers 1997). The term domestic violence is criticized for not identifying the roles of victim and offender. Similar terms criticized for this obfuscation include domestic dispute, family violence, conjugal violence, spouse abuse, partner abuse, and marital aggression. Other commonly used terms, such as battered women, abused women, wife abuse, and wife beating, identify the victim but obscure the offender. Terms such as wife abuse and spouse abuse are criticized for ignoring abuse outside of marriage. Many feminists and advocates use the term battered women, but it implies that a woman's main identity is that of a helpless victim. I use the term domestic violence in this study to more accurately reflect the language used in the discourse I analyzed.

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