An Integrated Investigation of Family Violence

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By

Joseph H. Michalski

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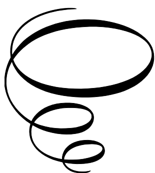

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To Farnaz

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PREFACE

The Problem of Family Violence

According to the World Health Organization's (2021) most recent estimates, approximately 27 percent of women worldwide have been subjected to some type of physical and/or sexual violence from a current or former husband or intimate partner at least once during their lifetimes. The authors of the study conclude that violence against women constitutes a "global public health problem of pandemic proportions, affecting hundreds of millions of women" (World Health Organization 2021: 42). Additionally, while intimate partner violence directed against women clearly has a global reach, the widespread nature of violence within families in general extends even further to include spousal violence against men, child abuse and neglect, elder maltreatment, and, perhaps most commonly, sibling fights and violence. If one were to include all forms of physical aggression *and* disciplinary practices (e.g., corporal punishment) used within domestic settings, then nearly everyone has experienced some type of family violence at one time or another. Almost no one can remain immune from such violence throughout the course of one's lifetime.

The irony might be that precisely because family violence has an almost ubiquitous character, the issue may not be perceived as an especially serious problem within the general population. In fact, many people would argue that the use of some degree of interpersonal physical aggression within the family should be considered entirely *normal*. For example, as discussed in chapter 5, most adults in the United States and Canada still believe in the limited use of corporal punishment to discipline children. Many parents also view the conflicts that siblings endure as an ordinary feature of childhood, even if violence sometimes erupts. Furthermore, in many cases of physical aggression between partners or among those caring for an elderly partner or parent, the perpetrators may not view their behaviors as *violent*—and sometimes the victims also deny that violence has occurred. In short, people have different ideas about what should be characterized as violence. As Brownstein et al. (2004: 6) observe, everyone has "his or her personal experiences and observations of violence," which help shape the mental images that each person constructs.

The definitional problem often plagues the social sciences as well: universal definitions of the most important concepts often simply do not exist. There may be as much ink expended in debating how concepts should be defined and measured as compared with the amount devoted to actual empirical research (see chapter 1). Consider the case of intimate partner violence (IPV). The persistence of definitional debates as to the "true nature" of IPV and resultant measurement disparities have long hindered efforts to integrate the knowledge generated from studies that span several disciplines (Hardesty and Ogolsky 2020). Moreover, the comparative evidence indicates that women and men who live in different cultures across the world express highly variable opinions as to whether psychological, emotional, economic, or spiritual abuse should be classified as *violence*. Perhaps most surprisingly, even physical and sexual abuse are not defined everywhere or in all instances as forms of "violence against women" (e.g., Nadeem and Malik 2021). In North American countries, however, nearly everyone agrees that IPV *must* include intentional and unwanted forms of both physical and sexual aggression at a minimum (Carlson and Pollitz Worden 2005).

Indeed, in an interconnected world with increased social media access, higher educational levels, and urbanization, we should not be surprised to learn that global cultural diffusion has started to shift the discursive landscape in regard to IPV. While cross-cultural differences may never disappear entirely, public opinion polling has shown a growing convergence of attitudes toward the rejection of IPV in the twenty-first century (Pierotti 2013). Within the academic, medical, and public health communities, nearly everyone routinely defines IPV (often used interchangeably with the term "domestic violence") as a "public health crisis" these days. The opening sentence of several journal articles for more than two decades includes some variation of that theme, as per these selected examples:

- "Domestic violence is a major public health problem" (Sisley et al. 1999: 1105).
- "Domestic violence, or intimate personal violence, a matter once considered private, has gained increased attention as a public health crisis" (Anderson and Kras 2005: 100).
- "Intimate partner violence is a worldwide public health problem that disproportionately affects women regardless of their social, economic, religious or cultural background" (Gomez-Beloz et al. 2009: 380).
- "Domestic violence, or intimate partner violence (IPV) as it has been identified more recently in the literature, has emerged as a

significant public health crisis within the United States that affects millions of individuals and families each year" (Nayback-Beebe 2012: 89).

- "Intimate partner violence is a public health crisis affecting more than 12 million women and men in the United States each year" (Grest et al. 2018: 560).
- "Domestic violence is a global health crisis, with some statistics showing that one in every three individuals worldwide will experience domestic violence in some form" (Su et al. 2021: 1).

While IPV has been singled out most often as a public health crisis, the various other forms of family violence often have been described in similar terms as well (e.g., Cerulli et al. 2019; Paz et al. 2005). Yet regardless of how one characterizes family violence issues, rigorous descriptions and theoretical explanations of such phenomena lie at the heart of the scientific mission. From a scientific perspective, we can boil the issues down to one fundamental question: *What explains family violence*? Yet as emotional and moral beings, we are often implicitly asking at the same time why would family members use violence and occasionally perhaps even *lethal* violence against those whom they profess to love? Gelles (2017: 128) has suggested that in trying to make sense out of the various forms of family violence and abuse that many people endure, "we are tasked with explaining the inexplicable." The challenge is indeed formidable. The current book nevertheless engages with the quandary by striving to integrate the most salient ideas and empirical evidence from across a multitude of scientific disciplines. Through the use of an integrated framework, we can effectively evaluate the extant theory and research that address each of four distinct relational forms of family violence: intimate partner violence, child maltreatment, elder abuse, and sibling bullying.

An Integrated Investigation

Titles are important. These provide the thumbnail descriptions of the core ideas involved in the study of a particular subject matter. The title ideally distinguishes the publication from similar works in the field. Interestingly, despite the fact that there have been literally hundreds of thousands of academic articles, chapters, books, and government reports devoted to family violence, a search of 55 online academic databases and a more general Google search revealed that no one has published the title "an integrated investigation of family violence." Substitute the terms *study* or *examination* for "investigation" and the results do not change. Hence the

current book represents a self-conscious effort to develop an esemplastic approach that integrates diverse concepts and frameworks into a more unified whole.

A conciliatory approach to knowledge-building can be described as *integrated pluralism*. Rather than privilege any specific disciplinary approach, to explain *why people behave as they do* demands that we draw upon the many different scientific fields that span various levels of influence, from the biopsychological to the cultural. To explain why people sometimes use violence in their encounters with each other or within their family relationships cannot be reduced to simplified monocausal explanations such as genetics, human nature, social learning, patriarchy, or social geometry. To be sure, as a scientific community, we certainly prefer to develop more parsimonious explanations whenever possible—but not at the expense of what Scherz (2015: 85) refers to as the "deeper understandings of underlying processes and mechanisms." Human social behavior presents far more complexity and demands that we should avoid the siren call of reductionism. Instead we are tasked with drawing upon complementary perspectives that can be synthesized to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the key determinants of family violence, as outlined in chapter 3.

In a nutshell, the key thesis suggests that there are five levels that must be considered to explain complex forms of human social behavior: 1) the bio-psychological reality of the human animal and the many drivers of behavioral investments; 2) the social psychological aspects of human learning and development, or socialization experiences; 3) the language, knowledge, and meaning systems that differentiate the human *person* from every known species, which are essential to the processes of intersubjective communication and the justification of human actions; 4) the social interactional dynamics of interpersonal relationships within social fields created by actors with multiple, differing statuses; and 5) the broader social networks, institutional arrangements, and sociocultural conditions within which individuals and groups are situated. These are the distinctive analytic levels of complementary theoretical branches that span scientific disciplines. If combined into a more coherent whole, we can then determine more accurately the probabilities of different behavioral outcomes across family relationships and from one cultural setting to the next.

Each chapter that examines specific types of family violence draws upon these five levels of analytic thinking to evaluate key ideas based on findings from the state-of-the-art research across the disciplines. The second half of each chapter includes theoretical treatments of two main

types of violence. For intimate partner violence, the discussion outlines separate theories to account for situational couple violence as distinct from coercive controlling violence. In reviewing violence committed against children, the key distinction involves explaining, respectively, corporal punishment and physical child abuse. The analysis of elder abuse includes separate analytic accounts for violence committed against cognitively intact seniors by their partners or children versus those who use violence to target more vulnerable seniors suffering from cognitive declines. The issue of sibling violence includes an innovative theory of sibling rivalry as distinct from the analysis of sibling bullying. The final chapter provides a synthesis of the main explanatory principles that have much broader implications for understanding and explaining human behavior in general. But why not just simply conduct a *sociological* analysis of family violence, especially based on my own specialized training in the field? The answer stems from a pivotal moment in my own life that changed forever my thinking about scientific explanations of human social behavior.

Pivotal Event

Life-course theorists in the social sciences employ a number of important concepts to help analyze the importance of transitions and trajectories in explaining how people's lives unfold within particular sociocultural and historical contexts. The life course approach uses the term *turning point* to refer to "an alteration or deflection in a long-term pathway or trajectory that was initiated at an earlier point in time" (Sampson and Laub 2005: 16). The concept highlights the importance of a fundamental break from the past to embark upon a new direction or trajectory, as distinct from a temporary change or mere fluctuation in behavior. With respect to the current manuscript, the turning point involved an entirely unexpected and pivotal event, which not only affected me *personally*, but shook my scientific thinking to the core.

In particular, my older brother, Dr. Stephen Michalski, died of what appeared to be a myocardial infarction on April 22, 2007. Suffering chest pains, he drove himself to the emergency department of the hospital where he practiced medicine as well. He offered his self-diagnosis to the staff, who inexplicably then left him unattended to await further assessment. After several minutes, a medical attendant returned, but noticed that my brother was unresponsive. Even more concerning was the observation that Steve's fists were clinched and his arms bent inward, a condition known as *decorticate posture*, which would suggest the possibility of brain damage. In the absence of being intubated, Steve was clinically dead for more than

20 minutes. Despite the long period of cardiac arrest, the staff eventually revived him after a specialist arrived. Yet what would be the condition of his brain following such an extended period without oxygen?

The prospects were not great. After being "put on ice" for the next week in a medically-induced coma, a process known as *therapeutic hypothermia*, Steve miraculously survived. I stayed with him daily in the hospital during that week, carefully following the staff's recommendations. In particular, my daily routine involved several hours of reading aloud to him and just *being there* in the hopes that there might be some benefits to stimulating his brain and body even while in the medically-induced coma. One week later, as the physicians weaned him off of his medication and warmed his core body temperature, his eyes started to move for the first time. A brief aside will help clarify the next critical event that followed.

Many years earlier, whenever Steve came home from medical school, I would greet him with an almost ritualistic invitation to come play basketball. My first words were always, "Steve! Hoops!" If he were not too tired, most the time that would be exactly what we would do, i.e., head to the local basketball court for some hoops. Hence when I noticed his eye movements on that Sunday evening (April 29, 2007), I leaned over Steve in the hospital bed and stated loudly: "Steve! Hoops!" He responded with a slight, noticeable smile. That indicated to me that he actually understood or somehow *remembered* the clarion call that inspired us to seek out and find a lively game of basketball, no matter what the season.

In the aftermath of the incident, I remained with him over the next two weeks of rehabilitation. Steve learned quickly how to speak again, while also engaging in rigorous physical therapy to regain his normal functional capacities. By the end of those two weeks, he could manage to have conversations and, for someone who did not know him previously, might even appear to be entirely "normal." After the first week, he was released from the hospital and we spent the next several days hanging out together. We engaged in a variety of daily activities such as shopping, preparing meals or eating out at restaurants, and visiting his recently purchased medical offices where he and his partner Miguel would meet with patients outside of the surgeries they performed. Most notably, we would venture to the park daily, where I had to teach Steve *literally* how to run again and, of course, to play basketball.

The story, though, does not have an entirely happy ending. Steve had recovered from his heart attack, but in the process had suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI): *hypoxic-ischemic brain injury* (a lack of oxygen for an extended period and long-term damage to cells), followed by *reperfusion*

injury. The latter occurs after the heart has been restarted and oxygen returned to the brain. The oxygen combines with highly reactive metabolites that actually damage the brain. In addition to lethal cellular consequences, cerebral edema (swelling of the brain) often occurs along with the constriction of blood vessels in the brain. For these reasons, patients such as my brother are often subjected to the aforementioned therapeutic hypothermia to reduce the potential swelling and the many adverse consequences that may result. The impacts can be permanent or may improve over time, which include movement disorders, memory loss or impairment, speech difficulties, weakness or immobility, and cognitive impairments such as difficulties with attention, concentration, and visual-motor skills.

In Steve's case, much like the patient that Squire et al. (2020) discuss from their research, he experienced most of the same sequalae following his resuscitation and recovery from cardiac arrest. He suffered significant neuronal losses within the amygdala in particular, including severe damage to his hippocampus, which resulted in dramatic impairments of short-term memory and problem-solving capacities (although his long-term memories largely remained intact). Steve ultimately suffered from a loss of his functional independence, certain challenges in basic activities of daily living, reduced executive functioning, and selected psychosocial effects such as increased anxiety. My brother survived, but he could no longer practice medicine. His lifestyle and daily routines changed irrevocably, as he moved in with our mother and lived with her for more than a decade before her recent admission to a long-term care facility. Steve was (and still is) my brother, but he was no longer *exactly* the same *person*.

We still laughingly refer to each other as "Dr. Michalski" on occasion, using these formal titles as a show of playful mutual respect for our esteemed statuses with each other. When I am in town visiting, we will shoot hoops or head to the gym together, where Steve can still lift much more weight than I could ever manage. He retains far more medical knowledge and a more comprehensive grasp of calculus than I should ever hope to have as well. Yet his daily routines, rituals, and communication habits reflect not merely a different lifestyle, but a different *person* with vastly different behavioral proclivities. Steve experienced a natural experiment of sorts, with observable *before-and-after* psychological and behavioral consequences. And so did I.

With my doctorate in sociology (along with an "ABD" in social work) and my built-in assumptions and biases to attribute the *causes* of human behavior to the social environment and cultural factors, my training left me

inadequately prepared to consider the possible effects of neuro-physiological and psychological influences. Steve's cardiac arrest and subsequent TBI forced me to rethink my approach to the study of human behavior. From a clinical standpoint, it was important to learn about these injuries, including their physiological, psychological, and social impacts, as well as the long-term prospects for recovery and optimal therapeutic interventions moving forward. Yet as a behavioral scientist, I was also compelled to reassess my foundational knowledge to consider the possibility that there might be more to the story of human behavior than sociocultural influences. I concluded in the end *not* that we are somehow *wrong* in using a sociological approach to study human behavior, but rather that we are only *partially right*. I have my brother Steve to thank, for he unwittingly opened up my eyes to viewing the world through a much more comprehensive, interdisciplinary lens. Thanks, Dr. Michalski!

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A great many people have contributed directly and indirectly to the final product, none of whom bears responsibility for any of the flaws or inadequacies that remain. Some of these influences shall be named here, perhaps to the surprise of at least a few individuals. The reason? The book has a much longer evolutionary history than most normal academic monographs. It has evolved from the first half of my intellectually embryonic development rooted in three decades of growing up and being educated in the United States, followed by three more decades of gestational growth after arriving as a landed immigrant in Canada in 1992. Having lived exactly 30 years in each country, I can confidently claim to be bi-cultural and fluent in speaking both "American" and "Canadian."

On a more serious note, I should like to thank first and foremost my own mother, Patsy Ruth Hannah Michalski, for all she was able to do in raising six children under difficult circumstances. Patsy has always been resilient, growing up as the only daughter of Eura Snell Hannah in Texas during the Great Depression. My mother was born on Sunday, September 29, 1929—almost exactly one month prior to the stock market crash known as Black Monday. I do not believe there was a causal connection between the two events, but simply mean to highlight the world into which Patsy was born almost a century ago. Her mother divorced Henry Hannah in 1932, which meant that Patsy was reared by a single mother in the 1930s. The two moved more than a dozen times before Patsy entered high school and found some level of economic security only with the arrival of World War II, as my grandmother transitioned into a real-life "Rosie the Riveter." Patsy is well into her 90s now and aware of her own cognitive decline to a degree, as she self-effacingly refers to herself as "the village idiot." I should mention too my debt of gratitude for my two sisters, Trisha and Lisa, both of whom continue selflessly to sacrifice their time, energy, love, and attention to ensure that our mother lives in as much comfort as possible during her final decade.

Murray Milner, Jr. (1935-2019), my primary academic influence, deserves special recognition for his many years of academic mentorship, wherein he demonstrated how to combine scholarly rigor with a deep-seated humanism and common decency. Along with Steve Nock (1950-2008), an expert in the study of the family and quantitative methods, these

two scholars inspired my love for learning and helped gradually steer my path, perhaps unknowingly, in the direction of the work presented here. Several additional scholars, many of whom are or were affiliated with the University of Virginia, deserve mention as well for helping to shape my thinking in various ways. Most notably, I thank Rachel Birnbaum, Donald Black, Rae Blumberg, Marian Borg, Geneviève Bouchard, Ted Caplow, Charles Cappell, Pam Cushing, Margrit Eichler, Johan Galtung, David Gil, Joseph Gittler, James Hawdon, Gregg Henriques, Paget Henry, David Hulchanski, James Hunter, Jason Jimerson, Don Kerr, Paul Kingston, Graham Lowe, Doug McAdam, Suzanne Peters, Gianfranco Poggi, Karen Rosenblum, Aysan Sev'er, Daphne Spain, Melissa Stanley, Gresham Sykes, Nico Trocmé, Corinna Jenkins Tucker, James Tucker, Catherine Worthington, and Mary Lou Wylie.

Finally, I should like to mention a few more folks from my personal circle of family members. I have dedicated the book to Farnaz Hamedi-Fijani Michalski, my lovely wife and life partner, who continues to be a genuine beacon of light and hope in an often dark and troubled world. A special thanks to my two sons, Lucas and Caleb, who helped ensure that I would forever remain in Canada, and to my three stepsons, Aryan, Shayan, and Pooyan, who reinforced that commitment. These five young men are exceptional *human beings* and truly inspire me with their personalities, attitudes, and abilities. Finally, I owe an *extra* special thanks to my "intellectual counselor," the oldest of the five boys, Pooyan (Ryan) Memarzadeh, who generously agreed to meet with me for countless Saturday morning discussions at the Black Walnut Café in London, Ontario. Ryan would read selected portions of the manuscript and then ask penetrating questions, while providing exceptionally insightful feedback aimed at helping me to frame my arguments more clearly. Thanks Ryan. And thanks everyone!

CHAPTER ONE

FAMILY VIOLENCE: DEFINITIONAL AND MEASUREMENT ISSUES

Defining Family

Families are the universal building blocks of societies throughout the world. As a basic institution, every society contains families in one form or another, even though the organization and behavioral functions can differ to some extent across cultures (Murdock 1957). Sociology texts typically define the concept of *family* in simplest terms as "a group of people who are related by descent, marriage, or adoption" (Ritzer and Guppy 2014: 400). Family historians often use an even more inclusive definition, such as "small groups of people linked by culturally recognized ties of marriage or similar forms of partnership, descent, and/or adoption, who typically share a household for some period of time" (Maynes and Waltner 2012: x). Governmental definitions tend to be similar. Statistics Canada uses the term "economic family" to refer to a group of two or more persons (couples may be opposite or same sex) who live in the same dwelling and who are related to each other by blood, marriage, common-law or adoption (including foster children).

At the subjective level, a family may be any group of people who define themselves as such, based on feelings of love, respect, commitment, responsibility, and identification with one another. From a feminist perspective, Eichler (1997) argues that the concept of family should be redefined to include any individuals who are involved in caring and enduring relationships, regardless of legal or blood ties. The approach places more emphasis on what people actually do rather than the formal structure or legal representations of the family. There are potentially many families of which one can speak, reflecting in part the different definitions used by researchers and governments. For practical purposes and colloquially, many people view the *nuclear* family as comprised of either: 1) cohabitating or married couples, with or without children, who share or define themselves as having a common home and usually have a sexually

intimate relationship; or 2) the many single parents raising children or caring for others within a common or shared home.

We can distinguish further between "families of origin" (those into which we are born) and "families of procreation" (those that we create through choosing partners and electing to have children). Families living within a shared household may be nuclear or extended, composed of complex sets of individuals who have varying relational ties with one another. The extended family can have a variety of structures, such as three generations occupying the same household or the presence of other relatives who share a dwelling with a nuclear family. While most societies these days privilege monogamous relationships, from an historical perspective families have included polygamous relationships in many societies.[1]

Moreover, the family can be viewed in a more dynamic fashion from a life-course perspective that Elder (1987: 179) describes as the "interlocking nature of individual trajectories within the family, the formation and dissolution of family patterns over time, and the relation between family and social change." Nearly everyone lives in more than one family over one's lifetime as family configurations evolve. The structure of the family in which one grows up changes with new unions and divorces, births and deaths, and other types of additions or losses to the primary group with whom one lives. The net result has been that the percentage of the population who lives in intact families without *any* structural change from birth to early adulthood has decreased significantly over the years—and represents a statistical minority these days.

Since World War II, there has been a dramatic rise in separation and divorce rates, cohabitating couples, lone-parent families, births outside of marriage, and blended families. Statistics Canada (2017a) reported there were more than 9.5 million families in Canada in 2016. At the same time, more people were living alone—28.2 percent of all households—than at any time previously in Canadian history. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that 35.7 million Americans lived alone in 2018, for an almost identical figure of 28 percent.[2] Additionally, the proportions of common-law couples, single-parent families, and same-sex couples have increased in both the

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[1]Pew Research Center (2020) reports that about two percent of the global population currently lives in households within which at least one member has more than one spouse or partner. While illegal in the majority of countries worldwide, most polygamy tends to be found in West and Central African countries, and, to a lesser extent in some Middle Eastern countries.

[2]Ellen Byron. June 2, 2019. "More Americans Are Living Solo, and Companies Want Their Business." Retrieved from: https://www.wsj.com/articles/more-americans-are-living-solo-and-companies-want-their-business-11559497606.

United States and in Canada. Family life continues to evolve and the configurations clearly have changed over time across North America and societies throughout the world.

Defining Conflict

Whatever the specific composition, families vary substantially in terms of subjective well-being, health, economic status, work-family stressors, and countless other factors—including their levels of "functionality" and "dysfunctionality" (Staccini et al. 2015). If every family were happy and functional, then there would not be nearly as much demand for the services of more than 200,000 therapists, family counselors, psychologists, and social workers in the United States alone. Just as every individual has flaws, every couple and family must deal with various problems that arise in due time. Any reasonable assessment would concede that intimate partners are not always great matches, especially based on the percentage of marriages that end in divorce and the even more frequent dissolution of common-law partnerships. Furthermore, many individuals who become parents may have their own serious problems or unresolved issues, while parenting itself introduces additional stressors.

The potential sources of domestic conflicts may stem from interpersonal problems, as well as the many social, economic, and health pressures to which individuals and families are exposed on a regular basis. Families are not fixed, static entities. The dynamic nature of the family can have a profound impact for each member as relationships evolve and as life circumstances ebb and flow across different social landscapes.[3] The relative instability of some family units at times can be a major source of stress with adverse impacts. The implications of changing family forms offer some key insights into the nature of family conflict and violence in advanced-industrial societies such as the United States and Canada (and beyond). These changes, which may not always be entirely predictable, often give rise to conflicts of varying intensities. Yet not every family experiences *violence*. Conflicts at times *may* involve violence, but most do not.

The ubiquitous nature of conflict cannot be disputed. The United States Institute of Peace views conflict as "an inevitable aspect of human interaction" and exists whenever "two or more individuals or groups pursue

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[3]Apart from twins (or multiple births), no two siblings grow up in the same family. The first-born child's life commences in circumstances quite different from those of her younger siblings, as parenting experience changes—and perhaps many other aspects of the family's situation (e.g., working arrangements, salaries, divorces, community location, housing status, and so forth).

mutually incompatible goals" (Colgan et al. 2017: 31). The term conflict nevertheless should not be equated with violence, although that often happens in the popular imagination. Note that conflict can be internal or external. We sometimes speak of individuals being conflicted, which refers usually to an *internal* struggle that they may be having. More often, though, the discussion turns to the many *external* conflicts in which individuals, groups, teams, organizations, or even whole societies might be embroiled.

How do we know if two or more people are in conflict with each other? A physical fight between the two sides might be an obvious behavioral expression of a conflict, although they might only be play fighting. In general, there are many different ways to express and respond to conflicts. In what other ways might individuals reveal themselves as being in a conflict with someone else? What might they do to convey that sense of conflict? While various indicators may suggest people are in conflict, the most important evidence stems from someone expressing a grievance in some fashion to indicate their displeasure. The idea of having a grievance means that a person believes that someone either has done something wrong, or perhaps represents something defined as undesirable or offensive.

From a behavioral standpoint, we know that people everywhere and certainly within their families use a range of different strategies with each other to express their grievances through actions such as shouting, swearing, or insulting another individual. Alternatively, some people offer compromises, discuss the issues calmly, or negotiate with each other as their preferred strategies. In some cases, those involved might stop talking to each other or opt for the "silent treatment." On still other occasions, they may recommend that someone or perhaps that both parties in a dispute should get therapy or counselling, or appeal to third parties to help mediate or settle their differences. The aggrieved might just avoid acknowledging their conflicts by doing nothing, or by letting someone else handle the problem. On the more aggressive side, disputants can threaten to leave or actually end the relationship, withhold money or other resources, and sometimes threaten or commit actual violence as a result of their grievances.

In short, despite the vast array of options for expressing grievances and managing conflicts, human beings sometimes initiate more forceful, aggressive, or even violent responses. While most people would view violence as conflict *mis*-management, the empirical evidence confirms that sometimes people can and do engage in all manner of physical aggression to deal with conflicts, such as pushing, slapping, grabbing, biting, choking, beating, raping, torturing, mutilating, maiming, and killing—either individually or as members of groups or coalitions under certain circumstances. Indeed, if one were to rely on the news as a main reference point of reality, the

conclusion might be that human beings live in an extraordinarily "violent world." Or, as Di Leo and McClennan (2012: 241) have stated succinctly, "*Violence is everywhere*."

Still, most conflicts are handled through *non-violent* means. Nearly everyone has occasional disputes, grievances, or differences of opinion with certain family members, friends, co-workers, or even complete strangers. The more common conflict management practices usually include one or more of the following: discussions or negotiations, expressions of indignation, disapproval or frustration, avoidance strategies, consulting those in positions of authority, enlisting mediators, or simply accepting things as they are without any further action. Black (1998) summarizes the many different behaviors with a typology of five "elementary forms" of conflict management that include self-help, avoidance, negotiation, settlement, and toleration. The key analytic questions would be why and under what circumstances do individuals respond in one of these ways rather than another, or why do some people engage in violent behavior as opposed to non-violent alternatives?

These are important issues since disagreements and unmet expectations are routine experiences in everyday life. Nearly everyone can recall the latest episode of being upset with another person, whether over a trivial matter or perhaps something more significant. How was the conflict handled? For example, if your partner does not arrive for a special event on time or invites friends over unexpectedly, what might be a typical response? What happens if children do not follow household rules or stay out past curfew? If someone breaches etiquette at the family dinner table, how do you manage the situation? And if a loved one "borrowed" your car without asking and then ended up in a fender-bender, what reactions would follow? Most people would be upset or even angry in these circumstances, but only a certain segment would turn to violence—and only *sometimes*—as their means of dealing with the conflict. What, then, determines how one responds to anyone within one's family who might offend, contradict, hurt, embarrass, or otherwise affront another individual in the domestic sphere?

An interesting experiment would be to track one's own behavior systematically over a full month, such as by keeping a diary. The data would likely reveal a tendency to handle almost all conflict (and for most people *every* conflict) without resorting to violence. Certain patterns often emerge as well. Common responses might include sighing, simply rolling one's eyes, or waiting patiently until able to resolve the issue. Nearly everyone has yelled or shouted at some point, or perhaps expressed disgust toward another individual. But the chances are that the average adult probably has *not* used physical violence recently to handle a challenging situation or in

response to being offended. For that matter, a great many adults have not used violence in years. What, then, prompts the use of violence? Even more fundamentally, what constitutes *violence* in the first place?

Defining Violence and Abuse

Violence has been defined in numerous ways, for both social scientific and political purposes. The concept often implies a range of physical, psychological, emotional, and other types of harm. People sometimes speak about inflicting emotional damage on others or commonly use the language of *abuse* as synonymous with *violence*. Within the family context, the term *domestic violence* dominates the discourse and usually implies various types of abuse, such as wife abuse, child abuse, and elder abuse.[4] The notion of domestic violence often conjures up images of domination, brutality, and perhaps even assault. Where violence can be defined as or equated with assault, then both the U.S. and Canadian legal systems may respond, in principle, with sanctions to the violations appropriate to their legal codes.

The definitional dilemma persists for many reasons, but one confounding issue is the conflation of the two terms *violence* and *abuse*. Analysts sometimes casually intermingle these terms in their discussions, such as Hattery's (2009: 11) definition of intimate partner violence as "the physical emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse that takes place between intimate partners." As a second example, Johnson and Dawson (2011: 4) define intimate partner violence "as any type of physical or sexual assault, physical threat, threats with weapons, deprivation of liberty, psychological and emotional abuse, and stalking perpetrated by men against legally married or common-law partners, girlfriends, or female dating partners, whether the relationships are intact or estranged."

The key definitional issue ultimately relates to the commentators' objectives, i.e., whether the individuals are social scientists, policymakers, media analysts, advocates, activists, or the public at large. As Durfee (2017: 110) explains, "the power to classify and define actions and individuals as *violent*, *abusive*, and/or *criminal* directly shapes research, policy, law, and practice." The linguistic devices used can influence the nature of the

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[4]The term *domestic violence* sometimes has a slightly broader connotation than *family violence*, referring to any form of violence that occurs within one's domicile, whether involving family or non-family members. Many authors use the term domestic violence, even though their analyses actually deal with violence among family members and especially between intimate partners. The two terms are used interchangeably in the current work, as the data and discussions concentrate almost exclusively on familial relationships.

discussion and scope of the social problem in question, as well as potential responses or interventions to ameliorate conditions. If one hopes to secure more support to combat the problem of family violence, then defining such violence more broadly serves one's interests in petitioning the government or local agencies for more resources. DeKeseredy (2011: 12), for instance, offers one of the most expansive definitions of "woman abuse" imaginable that many feminist scholars and social activists endorse:

> Woman abuse is the misuse of power by a husband, intimate partner (whether male or female), ex-husband, or ex-partner against a woman, resulting in a loss of dignity, control, and safety as well as a feeling of powerlessness and entrapment experienced by the woman who is the direct victim of ongoing or repeated physical, psychological, economic, sexual, verbal, and/or spiritual abuse. Woman abuse also includes persistent threats or forcing women to witness violence against their children, other relatives, friends, pets, and/or cherished possessions by their husbands, partners, ex-husbands, or ex-partners.

The term abuse, therefore, encompasses a broad array of phenomena, including both physical transgressions defined as violence *and* the non-physical forms of harm that include psychological, emotional, verbal, financial, spiritual or any other non-physical manifestations. The logic implies that one can be abusive without being physically violent toward another person, but the obverse does not hold: a person *cannot* be violent without being (physically) abusive. Moreover, in many instances where individuals perpetrate violence against family members, other forms of abuse co-occur, such as a verbal tirade that accompanies a physical assault.

The identification and study of abuse rather than violence, however, has several challenges. First, the concept cannot be codified as readily in the statute laws, which deal mainly with different types and levels of violence involving bodily harm or property damage. Second, the subjective nature of what individuals experience as abuse varies far more than one might expect, even to the point where some cultures may not view violence against wives as "abuse" (e.g., Rajan 2018) or clear cases of men attempting to have unwanted sex with women as "rape" (e.g., Helliwell 2000). There exists much more agreement as to what people generally mean by *violence*, at least within the contexts of specific societies. Finally, even more confusion surrounds the concept of abuse as commentators often interfuse the domains of scientific observation and moral judgments. With the term violence, there are legal statutes that can be referenced. Studying whether someone has or has not been *abused* presents greater observational difficulties insofar as the analyst must use additional measures with a more normative focus to

capture the different domains. Follingstad (2017: 59) has summarized the key argument accordingly:

> *Abuse* is not a scientific term, but, rather, a societal judgment that behavior has surpassed an acceptable threshold of conflict or deliberate attempts to harm. While it is not wrong for a society to make judgments, asking science to determine a specific threshold for murkier behaviors occurring within intimate relationships is not only asking science to make moral determinations but can result in significant errors in the application of such a threshold.

While the quote reflects the more extreme position to recommend that social scientists should not be asked to make judgments about the severity of the harm created, that does not mean one cannot still conduct research on the issue. To study abuse requires as ever that one should define the concept clearly and then employ an appropriate measurement strategy, which may differ from approaches that focus exclusively on physical violence. One such approach might be to use in-depth interviews to study people's subjective experiences associated with social interactions that are perceived or interpreted to be harmful. There are many innovative ways for mapping the severity or consequences that might result, such as photo voice (pictorial data), even if there has not been any overt behavioral expressions of violence per se (e.g., Mshana et al. 2022).

To help narrow the analytic focus, the current work focuses mainly on the *behavioral* dimensions of violence. Some scholars similarly have emphasized behavioral definitions. Black (2004: 146) defines violence as "the use of physical force against people or property, including threats and attempts," while Weiner et al. (1990: xiii) define violence as "the threat, attempt, or use of physical force by one or more persons that results in physical or nonphysical harm to one or more persons." These parallel definitions lack specificity, though, insofar as there are many contexts where behavior defined as such would be entirely acceptable or legal. For instance, a crushing block or tackle during a football game is a legal part of the game that could result in serious physical harm. The action might be described as a "violent hit" or a "violent collision," but that behavior differs from what most people consider to be illegitimate violence. The same behaviors that are encouraged and condoned on a football field would be entirely inappropriate elsewhere. Hence a definition of violence demands greater precision, at least in studying family violence as opposed to sports violence or colliding billiards balls.

Several analysts have attempted to define family violence within the domestic sphere with varying emphases. Durfee (2017: 109), for instance,

specifies "intimate partner violence" as "a pattern of behaviors whereby one intimate partner attempts to gain power and control over the other partner through the use of threatened or actual violence." Hamby (2017a: 177) combines four elements to define interpersonal violence as "nonessential, unwanted, intentional, and harmful behavior." The definition stresses that the behavior has caused unnecessary harm to someone, would be deemed unwanted, and occurred *not* by accident. Yet that definition describes more accurately any type of abusive behavior (i.e., behavior that causes harm). The definition thus must be refined even further to study violence in family settings. While some evidence suggests that other forms of abuse may cause as much or even greater harm than strictly physical violence (e.g., Straus and Sweet 1992), narrowing the conceptual focus to distinguish among distinct types of behaviors enhances the explanatory power of competing models if developed in relation to specifiable outcomes (Johnson 2006).

Based on the above reasoning, interpersonal violence refers to any *threat, attempt, or use of non-consensual physical force by one or more individuals against another person or group.* The definition equates violence with the threatened, attempted, or the actual use of physical force between individuals. The additional modifier "unsanctioned" could be included to delimit the relevant cultural contexts by noting that the violence does not have a socially approved or legal basis. At the immediate level of interpersonal interaction, the unsanctioned nature of violence may simply mean that the victim(s) did not *want* the violence to occur (i.e., the "non-consensual" component). The concept of *family violence* then reflects any such behaviors that occur within domestic settings among family members.[5]

As with the notion of conflict, violence can erupt at any moment and across all types of social relationships. The fact that much violence happens to occur within domestic settings insinuates that there might be distinct aspects of familial relationships that require further investigation. A central premise that informs the investigation here suggests that there are evolutionary, psychodynamic, and situational aspects in the familial realm that yield an increased probability of generating violence. Furthermore, the prevalence of different types of family violence can be understood as located within the broader community context and subject to distinctive cultural influences that can vary substantially. These issues will be the focus of much of the theoretical and empirical work examined throughout the current book.

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[5]Lystad (1975: 328) defined family violence as a "mode of behavior involving the direct use of physical force against other family members." She noted further that "physical force in the family varies in severity from homicide at one extreme to mild spankings at the other."

Different Types of Interpersonal Violence

A related issue that can sometimes confound family violence analyses is the degree to which analysts have confounded different phenomena altogether, particularly by collapsing all instances of violence into a dichotomous outcome of lifetime (or time-limited) *violence* and *nonviolence* in relationships. Consider a pair of hypothetical scenarios where researchers are studying the relationship experiences of two heterosexual couples. The study team opts to conduct phone interviews using standardized survey instruments such as the Conflict Tactics Scale (see below), along with a series of in-depth qualitative questions about possible experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV).

In the first case, the female partner reports she was pushed once by her partner during the preceding 12 months, but that was the only case of violence she ever experienced in their ten-year relationship. More specifically, she recounts in an extended interview that she and her husband were having a rather intense argument. She indicates that she was yelling at him just inches from his face, at which point he extended his arm and pushed her away to a distance of approximately three feet. No other violence or physical aggression occurred in that context and none ever occurred previously during their many years of interactions. Finally, she reports having enjoyed a long-term, healthy, loving partnership overall.

By comparison, a second woman reports multiple instances of her partner striking her, beating her, throwing objects at her, and one case where he started to strangle her, all of which occurred within the past year. The woman has continued to remain in the relationship, for various reasons that she discloses during the in-depth interview that highlight critical issues of financial dependency and trauma. Despite the dramatic differences in these women's experiences and the probable differences in "violent tendencies" between the two male partners, both would end up being classified as perpetrators of IPV in statistical modeling, whether measured over the last 12 months or lifetime prevalence. But are these two males and their behaviors toward their partners similar in any truly meaningful way?

Some scholars argue instead that violence has distinct forms such that there are "multiple types of violence" (Arana and Guerrero 2010: 347). In some instances, violence typologies are based on perpetrators' motivations (e.g., Block and Block 1991; Bardis 1973) or the relationships of those involved (e.g., Messner and Tardiff 1985). Black (1983) has argued that violence can be conceptualized in large part as either "moralistic" or "predatory" in nature. The former refers to a type of social control, or the

use of violence in response to a grievance. The latter refers to violence used purely for the purpose of exploitation (see Cooney and Phillips 2002).

Johnson (1995, 2008) has argued that violence between intimates can be qualitatively different. Much IPV, for example, may be thought of as situational couple violence, involving a symmetrical pattern of partners lashing out as the end-product of an argument (Anderson 2002; Johnson and Leone 2005). Such violence differs dramatically from intimate terrorism, which tends to be less common, male-initiated, asymmetrical, and often involves more serious injuries and other forms of abuse to maintain coercive control (Johnson 2008; see Stark 2007). Johnson's full typology includes four types of intimate partner violence: 1) violence by partners that occurs when a conflict escalates on an occasional basis, or "situational couple violence"; 2) violence accompanied by a pattern of coercive control exercised in a relationship with a nonviolent or violent but noncontrolling partner, or "intimate terrorism" (often described as "coercive controlling violence"); 3) violence committed by a non-controlling partner against a partner who exhibits a pattern of coercive control and violence, or "violent resistance"; and 4) violent and controlling behavior characteristic of both partners in a relationship, or "mutual violent control."

Much family violence research has focused on the first two types to evaluate the adequacy and explanatory value of the distinction between situational couple violence and coercive controlling violence (intimate terrorism) among different subgroups (Stark and Hester 2019; Hardesty and Ogolsky 2020). Yet the notion of family violence extends beyond intimate partnerships. Consider the case of corporal punishment. Many parents continue to use at least mild forms of physical punishment as a means of disciplining their children (see chapter 5). Is the occasional use of a light spanking that has no real *physical* effect the behavioral equivalence of routine beatings that leave a child bloodied, bruised, or even fearing for one's life?[6] What factors might help explain why a great many parents still use some type of corporal punishment as a disciplinary strategy, but a much smaller percentage physically abuses their children, thereby violating child protection laws? And what exactly are the contexts within which the different types of physical aggression are perpetrated?

As the current discussion reveals, many challenges in the study of family violence persist, especially because of the competing strategies that have been employed both to conceptualize and to measure such sensitive

[6]There may yet be additional consequences even in cases of mild punishment, such as heightened cortisol reactivity to stressors, various neural effects, and changes in brain functioning (see Cuartas et al. 2021), as well as potential emotional and psychological effects.

issues. There has been a tendency often to define key terms, such as abuse and violence, based on the *consequences* associated with the social interactions rather than as the *explicandum* (i.e., "that which must be explained"). As a further consideration, the degree to which analysts conflate different behaviors, such as studying all forms of child maltreatment simultaneously, creates explanatory difficulties since the behaviors being investigated may or may not have similar underlying causes.

While studying the interrelationships among behaviors and associated outcomes has real value, much explanatory progress can emerge too from identifying more precisely what might be happening from a behavioral standpoint. That task, however, requires a broadening of our analytic focus to include the different dimensions and to study the underlying mechanisms at different analytic levels that directly and indirectly affect human behavior. To that end, a more conciliatory and synergistic approach will be proposed. One core assumption of the approach suggests that we cannot study "human animals" divorced from their sociocultural contexts to arrive at a satisfactory explanation of their behavior. But neither can we exclusively study social contexts without understanding and including the biopsychological drivers that help shape our responses to different environments. In short, the "social context" matters—and "human nature" matters as well.

Social Context Matters

To clarify why social context matters, consider the words of Pope Francis at a 2017 peace conference, where he urged faith leaders everywhere to renounce violence: "Let us say once more a firm and clear 'No!' to every form of violence, vengeance and hatred carried out in the name of religion or in the name of God. Together let us affirm the incompatibility of violence and faith, belief and hatred."[7] The Pope reaffirmed a core *religious* wisdom that coheres with the Abrahamic faiths and the decalogue: "Thou shalt not kill." The holy texts, though, routinely qualify that statement to assert that *innocent* life cannot be killed.[8] Someone must determine what constitutes

[7]Magdy Samaan and Nick Squires. April 28, 2017. "Pope Francis urges Islamic leaders to reject violence carried out in the name of religion." Retrieved from: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/28/thou-shalt-not-kill-pope-francis-urges-islamic-leaders-reject/.

[8]According to the Qu'ran (17:33) and Muhsin Khan: "And do not kill anyone which Allah has forbidden, except for a just cause. And whoever is killed (intentionally with hostility and oppression and not by mistake), We have given his heir the authority [(to demand Qisas, Law of Equality in punishment or to forgive, or to take