Theorizing About Violence
Observations From the Economic and Social Research Council’s Violence Research Program

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The director of the Economic and Social Research Council Violence Research Program (VRP) in the United Kingdom discusses and debates the impacts of the program in the context of contemporary ideas about violence and current U.K. policy and practice in the field. The projects in the program included 2 historical studies and 18 contemporary studies of violence in the home, schools, prisons, neighborhoods, leisure establishments, massage parlors, and on the street. For example, studies focusing on the nighttime economy in U.K. cities, on paramilitary punishment beatings in Northern Ireland, and on violence experienced and perpetrated by girls are discussed here. Five projects addressed gendered violence, and three addressed domestic violence specifically. Lessons from the VRP are drawn out in this article in a personal account. These lessons include the fact that violence is not hidden, that the meanings of violence are gendered, and that people’s accounts of violence matter.

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In the United Kingdom, the government-sponsored Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the premier funding body for social science research. During 5 years (1997 to 2002), the ESRC sponsored a research program on violence. Twenty projects, selected from 241 proposals, were funded, exploring diverse topics such as domestic violence in pregnancy, violence in prisons, paramilitary punishment beatings in Northern Ireland, violence within schools and children’s homes, and others.1 Interdisciplinary in its scope, the Violence Research Program (VRP) aimed to learn about violence to the person. The studies focused on examining violence in particular arenas—homes, schools, prisons, neighborhoods, leisure establishments, massage parlors, and on the street, and two historical projects brought a perspective that challenged our contemporary assumptions about how we understood and accounted for violence. Despite this diversity, however, there were many synergies in the findings. The lessons mapped across the projects were taken to policy makers, academics, activists, and practitioners for debate, discussion, and challenge to current practice.

Of special relevance is the way gender—as a way of grounding our theorizing—intersects the study of violence, and, of course, there are many lessons from the VRP to
assist our thinking about violence of and to men. My expertise as director of the program drew from my own experience as a commentator on violence against women for more than 25 years. I also drew on this expertise to assist me to draw lessons common across projects exploring very different forms of violence. I was later invited to put some of these lessons from the VRP into practice by the London Metropolitan Police, and in doing so I tested out my own presumptions about thinking about violence. In September 2000, for instance, I conducted the first U.K. nationwide day count of domestic violence within four organizations (Stanko, 2001). From 2001 to 2002, I directed an action research project within the metropolitan police examining ways of using the police crime records on hate crime and domestic violence as strategic information for innovation in police practice (Stanko et al., 2003). This practical work taught me about the advantages of using perspectives on violence against women to think more creatively across all forms of violence. (I enjoyed this work so much I have now left academic life to work full-time with the metropolitan police.)

This article seeks to draw out a few of the synergies to share with those who work on the problem of violence against women in the United Kingdom, the United States, and internationally. The program awarded five of its 20 projects specifically to studies of violence against women: three exploring domestic violence, one examining violence against prostitutes, and one focusing on girls’ experiences of violence. But virtually all the studies—particularly the work on homicide, violence against professionals working in the community, violence in the leisure industry, and violence in residential homes, neighborhoods, and schools—have relevant findings that can be linked to our thinking about violence and gender, and by extension violence against women. Taken as a whole, the VRP’s findings demonstrate the significance of why we need to take gender seriously. The more we know about the relationships between victim and perpetrator and between both these parties and the institutions with which each (and often both) interact, the better able we are to challenge so many forms of violence against women.

The Study of Violence and the Study of Violence Against Women

Twenty-five years ago, when I began my work on violence, along with most criminologists and police officials I assumed that only strangers committed “real” violence. It was my PhD thesis research that forced me to rethink this criminological axiom. During my work in the New York district attorney’s office (Stanko, 1981 to 1982), I learned that much of the violence that comes to the attention of the criminal justice arena involves parties who are known to each other. In the mid-1970s, domestic violence (a term I had not yet heard) was not the kind of violence that prosecutors often took seriously. I still remember the district attorney saying about a woman who had been shot in the head by her boyfriend, “If she dies we have
manslaughter, if she lives and is a vegetable, we have assault in the first degree, and if she recovers she will probably drop the charges.” This quote haunts me to this day. It is one that I have returned to time and time again to understand professionals’ and institutions’ responses to violence.

Understanding violence requires one to develop a cognitive map for contextualizing “what happened.” The landscape is tightly woven around social identities, social meanings, and social context. It is virtually impossible, I would argue, to separate the social and legal meaning of an incident from its wider social, political, and economic context. Statute on criminal harm occasionally specifies such context (excluding the legal definition of rape from those parties who are legally married, e.g., move). But usually, the context of violence provides a powerful grounding for establishing its meanings.

The VRP projects consistently affirmed the significance of context—for theorizing, for practice, for policy. How “seriously” we as a society respond to an incident of violence varies by the situation within which it takes place. The study of punishment beatings in Belfast, Northern Ireland, for example, used the statement of politicians that the peace agreement had led to “an acceptable level of violence.” The researchers were challenging this “acceptable” level because it denied the impact of such beatings on its victims. The assumptions about the social context of the politics of the “peace agreement,” the collective tolerance of a population embedded in such politics, and expectations that witness intimidation was so rife that frontline youth or social workers had to constantly manage people’s anxieties about punishment beatings combined to influence the way in which communities in Northern Ireland understood this form of torture (see Knox & Monaghan, 2003). That punishment beatings became a part of the political debate in some ways glossed over the devastating effects on individuals. Articulating the tension over levels of tolerance that perhaps tacitly associated punishment beatings with peace was necessary to challenge this form of violence, the researchers argued.

Another of the VRP projects explored bouncers in the nighttime economy. The researchers revealed—based on their extensive ethnographic work—that bouncers were hired to be intimidating and to use, if necessary, violence to maintain order in pubs and clubs. The mostly male victims who might have come to police attention because they were beaten up or injured in a nightclub or pub failed to substantiate reports of violence. Few of these incidents found their way through the criminal justice system (Winslow, Hobbs, Lister, & Hadfield, 2003). The men’s reluctance to substantiate allegations of pub violence sounds strikingly similar to those of battered women or women sexually assaulted: “It was my fault”; “it was just a fight”; “I was drunk”; or the police failed to take the details in a way that led to a criminal investigation. These are but a few of the justifications for failing to prosecute criminal injuries arising from pub and club violence.

The VRP studies underscored the observation that social context is highly relevant to the way in which violence is defined as criminal harm or as harmful by perpetrator, victim, criminal justice official, and society at large. In many respects, the feminist challenge to criminological theorizing revolved around the demand to recognize
how familiarity is a central feature of criminal violence to women. Indeed, familiarity facilitates discourses for minimizing the harm of violence—for women as well as for men. Remember the words of the prosecutor I cited earlier. So much of the feminist work on domestic and sexual violence articulates the ways familiarity disables a language of criminal harm. Battered women speak of damaging relationships, of their reluctance to separate children from a dangerous father, of their family and kin ties to a man who is violent. Women’s use of a discourse of self-blame has not diminished during the 25 years I’ve been working in this field. Just sit around the kitchen of any refuge or battered women’s shelter today. Our feminist theorizing has been able to capture this discourse and others, a tribute largely to the antiviolence work of feminists and other activists who insisted that we deal with “the ordinary and the everyday” violence in women’s lives.

I’d like to focus here on three broad points to illustrate the collective lessons from the VRP and how I think these could be reflected in the debate in the field of violence against women. The first is the truism linked to much of the work on violence against women: Violence is hidden. I question whether it is useful to insist on thinking about violence as if it is largely hidden. In doing so, we render invisible what we do see and know about. The second lesson addresses the link between gender and the meaning of violence. What does knowing gendered perspectives tell us about violence—and women? And finally, I would like to return to the importance of using women’s ordinary voices in accounts and accounting for violence. We had to learn to hear ordinary women about ordinary violence. Now we sometimes listen to what they say. But all too often, in so many areas around the world, we still do not listen enough or effectively. If we did, perhaps we would challenge violence against women—and all violence—more effectively.

**Lesson 1: Violence Is Not Hidden**

In the closing months of the VRP, I hosted five regional seminars on the findings from the program. Inevitably—as it happened—one of the first questions asked about the program was about the hidden nature of violence. People seemed more interested not in what the researchers found but in what part of the phenomenon—violence—remained out of frame. Audience after audience asked the researchers first about aspects of the work that was still “unknown,” hidden. For whatever reason, the audience wanted to talk about findings about violence as if the researchers’ work was not a form of documentation and analysis of violence. Where did these questions come from? Perhaps people now accept the findings of the late 1970s and early 1980s that clearly demonstrated that much violence is often hidden from official view. Early feminist work exposed the commonness of sexual abuse and physical assault among populations of women. Such exposure relied heavily on examining women’s experiences through social science surveys, typically modelled after crime victim surveys.
As study after study reveals, little of violence against women comes to the attention of criminal justice officials. People’s acceptance, however, of the hidden nature of violence has left a gap in our ability to challenge the current state of responses to violence when it is reported to any official agency. What are the implications of not acting on what we do indeed know? Official documentation—from police records to social services files—are not explored for what kind of action leads to successful or helpful interventions. Moreover, we virtually ignore the information about violence held by family and friends—often the first port of call for advice and assistance following violence.

Records of social service departments in the United Kingdom, rehousing requests for those seeking safe refuge, episodes recorded by schools, medical histories, and records from prisons, residential homes, and even the police are rife with documented incidents of violence. Yet, we seem to take “hidden” violence more seriously, almost to the extent that we accept that recorded incidents are a distortion of the hidden and thus less relevant to our understanding of violence. Instead, we should view documentation as giving insight into what does come to be recorded so that we can begin to interrogate what such records tell us or what the participants tell us about why, when, and where violence (that is known to officials) happens. When we study the public records, we can hold officials to account for addressing in a holistic way the violence they do know about from their own information. We should be asking how those who come to the attention of officials will be supported, helped, or provided with competent, sympathetic treatment. And we should have a way of documenting why such support did not lead to a successful intervention. We need to know why official knowledge about violence is not often translated into action that supports, helps, or furthers policy to reduce violence and to make people’s lives following violence better.

In Britain, our ability to interrogate our official records for the lessons about violence lags behind the study of violence gleaned from victim surveys and qualitative research with survivors. One opportunity to use routine medical care and records came in the study in the VRP of the relationship between domestic violence and pregnancy (see Bacchus, Mezey, & Bewley, 2003, 2006 [this issue]). Along with capturing an estimate of the prevalence of domestic violence, the study demonstrated the difficulties in changing the practice and the culture of medical care to include systematic understanding about domestic violence. Midwives were trained and supported to ask what were considered to be highly sensitive questions about violence and its history in women’s lives. Yet, many of the midwives felt uncomfortable. And the chaos of the institution’s records was revealed. Women’s medical records were lost or otherwise incomplete, preventing medical practitioners from seeing important clinical information about patients. The researchers also documented how some women did attend antenatal clinics in a distressed state, needing immediate support and advice about domestic violence. But few health staff could cope with this interruption to their normal routine of administering antenatal care. Advice and support was and still is not readily available throughout the National Health Service.
Domestic violence has an impact on the work of clinical staff, but it is not well managed, not considered a routine part of “doing medicine.” Recognizing that domestic violence must be addressed as part and parcel of clinical care might ease the resistance of the midwives to incorporating screening and monitoring questions into their normal antenatal practices. As such, domestic violence comes to light in the course of standard medical care for pregnant women. It is not, as such, hidden. Worse, it is treated as not relevant to the medical care of pregnant women. The more we ask direct questions about domestic violence in pregnancy, and record it as part of the medical record, the more domestic violence becomes known as a potential danger to pregnant women and their unborn children. Making the known visible, rather than “discovering” hidden violence, should change practice and reduce violence.

But visibility does not always change practice and policy. Another VRP project exposed high levels of violence to some groups of women. For these women, violence is a very part of their working lives. Women who sell sex experience very high rates of men’s violence. The study by Hart and Barnard (2003) found that nearly two out of three female prostitutes had experiences of serious violence in their lives. One in three of the 240 working women who completed questionnaires reported at least one instance of violence in the previous six months. Of the women reporting violence, nearly one in two reported being slapped, kicked, or punched. In fact, violence is much more of a problem and leads to more injurious consequences for the women than sexual diseases. The project sought to examine the differences in the kinds and levels of violence women who sell sex on the streets or in massage parlors experience. Street-working prostitutes experienced higher rates of violence and were most likely to report violence to police. Yet, many of the outreach projects for women selling sex in the United Kingdom focus on women’s sexual health and aim specifically to prevent the risk of infection of sexually transmitted diseases. Similar to the care of pregnant women, health care for street-working women should also link up with the need for advice and support around violence as an essential part of services to working women. The high proportion of street-working women who encounter violence is known to police, to the women themselves, to other health and social service providers. Indeed, working women incorporate violence avoidance into the very way they “do sex work”—sex acts incorporate self-protection (see Hart & Barnard, 2003). Planning to avoid violence becomes the routine for many women who sell sex. And as a result, much of the violence perpetrated by the clients goes unchallenged because its avoidance is part of better working practices. Treating violence as routine is mistakenly understood as treating violence as hidden.

We must find a way of documenting good and helpful intervention rather than continuously documenting “hidden” violence against women. Research on domestic violence in the United Kingdom suggests that family and friends are told about abuse by more than half of the women answering surveys. So too, we find other public service professionals come into contact with sexually and physically abused women on a regular basis. Indeed, U.K. studies suggest that women tell their family doctors about
domestic violence as often as they tell police. Moreover, we might further speculate that next to help with the care of children, women most often use public service contacts to minimize the impact of violence. What amazes me—in a country such as the United Kingdom that values its public services—is that we do not know the impact of the need for services triggered by violence. We do not properly document the best practice that delivers the best outcomes for the safety of women and children—despite what must be a volume of information throughout our public service records. If we treat violence as hidden, we even fail to interrogate the impact of “revealing” violence on public service provision itself—even though we know it must be a substantial contribution to why women seek the advice and support of public services.

What I learned about the study of hidden violence from the VRP is that there is record after record of violence in so many places, especially in public services. Why do we insist on speaking about the hidden when we can be documenting and challenging what we do see in a more comprehensive and systematic way? Perhaps it is because we accept the premise that violence is hidden in official records because we naturalize the relationship between gender and violence—and its different forms. For example, it is misleading in social policy terms to fail to think about the relationship between masculinities, leisure, and violence when speculating about how to reduce the copresence of alcohol with violence in many public records. Any visit to a casualty department in a hospital on a Friday or Saturday evening would demand that policy makers, hospital administrators, and staff ask questions about the way leisure, gender, and violence coexist with such regular frequency and causing such regular damage. The complexities of addressing ways of minimizing the harm of these important features of some forms of violence would take us away from the hospital casualty department and into the very way the leisure industry has changed in the past few years. This change dovetails alongside wider social developments in young people’s social lives (more money for public socializing), town center planning (less choice to socialize outside of places where alcohol is sold cheaply), and policing a large number of very drunken young men and women. Although only one of the constellation of factors, ignoring gender in any analysis of violence contributes to hiding its impacts.

**Lesson 2: The Meanings of Violence Are Gendered**

The debate—is violence gendered?—rages across academic and popular discussions about men’s violence to women. The undercurrent—some have even labelled it a backlash against feminism—is the assertion that men’s experiences of physical and sexual violence are the same as women’s in the domestic setting. Some argue—with great vitriol at times—that as a result of this presumed symmetry, there should be no special attention paid to violence against women. What is at the heart of this debate about the symmetry of violence, I suggest, is the denial of gender as adding anything special to our thinking about violence, including that in the domestic settings.
Why is it so important that I argue here that gender is a feature of what we know about the way violence affects people’s lives? Gender is more than being male or female. It is a system of reference, a psychological and social grounding in community. It might be absurd to suggest such a simplistic précis of gender in this journal titled Violence Against Women, but the debate is one that many of this journal’s readers have engaged with—as students, as activists, as policy makers, as feminists. What many of the projects from the VRP showed was that at the very least, gender matters—to those who experience violence, to the way it is understood by others, and to the way institutions are capable of addressing the complex web of social relations that must be in place to support the victim and to challenge and support the offenders (to stop hurting others), and to insist that other people and institutions play their part in supporting the transformation of gendering that leads to harm.

A good example of my argument can be found in the study by Michele Burman and her colleagues (Burman, Brown, & Batchelor, 2003) of girls’ experiences of violence in Scotland. This study attracted much attention from journalists throughout the 5 years of VRP. Journalists’ questions were indicative of what they argued were common public assumptions about girls and violence: (a) girls who commit violence were very bad or very mad; (b) violence was understandable “when committed by men”; (c) our sense of societal equilibrium is linked with never being afraid of the stilettos walking behind you. Burman and her colleagues were insistent on opening the inquiry in a way that listened to what girls had to say about violence. The journalists were searching for evidence of changing cultural norms for girls that have (somehow until now) managed to contain its “unwomanly” forms. These forms, I would suggest, are most transparent when we examine girls’ violence. Although violence has always been part of girls’ and women’s lives (we “understand” that women are victims, for instance), the violence of women has been condemned, vilified as indiscretions beyond the imagination of womanhood itself. Throughout the history of criminology as a discipline, women’s law breaking (and especially the use of violence) has been portrayed as out of character for normal women (see Klein, 1973). What this project exposed is the fact that we as a society are still firmly entrenched in thinking about girls’ violence as unnatural.

Girls, this study showed, manage the violence in their lives. Burman and her colleagues challenged the notions that violence is hidden from girls’ lives. The study found that 98.5% of the girls had witnessed firsthand some form of fighting. Nearly two out of three of the girls knew someone who had been physically hurt or injured by violence. Two in five of the girls experienced someone deliberately hitting, punching, or kicking them. The journalists concluded that far from naming violence as a part of girls lives to be managed, the findings exposed an aspect of gender that must be changing. Girls, the journalists speculated, were becoming “more violent.”

The heart of the debate in theorizing about violence is theorizing about difference—and thinking about how differences maintain so many of the boundaries between privilege and degradation. The intersection of such major features of one’s being—gender,
class, sexuality, race, age, and so forth—and the way in which social privilege is awarded, challenged, denied, or assumed is the core substance of sociological and economic debate. It is at the heart of whether violence is “naturalized” or “condemned.” Social and economic privilege becomes the medium to make visible or invisible the impact of violence. We do not need to see the suffering of the excluded. Indeed, we do not want to see the suffering of the excluded. Worse, we make conscious decisions about what suffering is visible. Often, there is an attempt to turn its meaning into something else (defiance, resentment, self-harm, and so forth).

What difference does gender make in theorizing about violence? The projects of the VRP demonstrated time and time again the salience of gender to the meanings of violence. Gender—whether one is male or female (or even has the knowledge of both, as in the case of transsexuals)—is core to the way inmates, schoolchildren, young residents of residential homes, and users of public space for leisure (to name only a few) speak about their lives vis-à-vis violence and safety. People understand the impact of violence, the way they are treated, as “just a part of their daily lives.” They also understand whether those in a position of power to mediate or to minimize the violence will do so or will stay silent. The mechanisms of silence are so embedded in the texture of social and economic privilege. Gender thrives within this fluidity of privilege and exclusion. This does not mean that all women or all men have the same relationship to privilege and exclusion. Gender, quite simply, still matters and influences the way we speak, conceptualize, and challenge violence. To lose sight and insight by ignoring how gender matters impoverishes any analyses of violence.

Nearly all acts of violence are either witnessed directly or known about by third parties, the VRP study of bystander intervention found (Levine, Reicher, Cassidy, & Harrison, 2002). The responses of bystanders are crucial in determining whether violence thrives or subsides. Moreover, the behavior of bystanders depends upon how they understand their social relationships with the three parties to violent events: fellow bystanders, the victim, and the perpetrator. Where bystanders perceive themselves to be a part of a common group, the behavior of others will influence what they do. Where bystanders perceive themselves and the victim of aggression to be a part of a common group, they are more likely to intervene and support the victim. Promoting intervention against violent crime depends upon developing a broader sense of group membership so that others are protected as part of a common in-group.

Many of us are bystanders. Our access to witnessing violence is also often gendered. We know now that most women who are battered tell someone, usually a friend or a relative. If battering persists, gets worse over time, and becomes potentially lethal, we also know that many people know about the woman’s situation. The accumulated research on violence against women, moreover, gives us plenty of information about the nature of violence in the home—the patterns of desistence, the patterns of escalation, the patterns of denial, the patterns of escape, the patterns of challenge, and so forth. Social policy defines the boundaries of state responsibility or state responsiveness to social and criminal harm. In the United States, with the virtual demise of any
welfare-based social and economic cushion, the debate revolves primarily around the parameters of the legal responses to physical and sexual violence. In many other countries in the West, the resources of social policy include escape routes that may be facilitated by other social benefits, such as access to social housing and public and child benefits.

Gender still matters in criminal harm—for men as well as for women. By and large men hurt other men and are often the perpetrators of women’s and children’s abuse. Women—when they are the perpetrators—also hurt women, children, and men, but at rates significantly different to those of men. We learn this when we listen to the voices—of the carers, of the victims, of the perpetrators. The VRP demonstrated clearly the importance of these voices to the study of violence, and it is to the importance of voice that I now turn.

Lesson 3: People’s Accounts Matter

Researchers who participated in the VRP spoke to a wide range of people and examined a host of official and unofficial documents during their studies. The voices of those many people who provided our researchers with data were central to our discussions. Our internal debates often returned to trying to come up with a definition of what violence means, justifying one position or another through the voices of those many research participants. Despite an assumed, almost self-evident core, as I have suggested elsewhere (Stanko, 2003), violence as a term is ambiguous and its usage is in many ways molded by different people, as well as by different social scientists, describing a whole range of events, feelings, and harm. What violence means is and will always be fluid. It is this fluidity that provides the space for disrupting violence, altering its impact on people’s lives and on the way in which we give meaning to it in society at large.

As an interdisciplinary social science program on violence, the VRP reflected the actions and accounts of a great many different kinds of people analyzed through many different lenses. One thread running through the various projects is how many of those affected by violence understood the unspoken and unwritten rules of engagement. People give us accounts of these unspoken rules. For example, there is a great deal of concern about rises in assaults within prison. The VRP’s study of prison violence, for instance, found that most prisoners who became involved in violent incidents did not want to fight. The inmates reported that they did so because “they saw no other option” (Edgar, O’Donnell, & Martin, 2002). The researchers found that in every incident they studied, there was an identifiable conflict between the parties involved. The conflict might have been imagined by one party—conflict does not always have to be mutual or mutually understood. (Why would we expect a woman to understand why a man would hit her because the dinner was late?) But the use of force to resolve the conflict was not mindless. One or more of the parties could always explain why the incident had occurred. Nor was the target of the violence random. In very few cases were the
parties completely unknown to each other. The researchers conclude that the focus on
violence in prisons is often through the lens of how best to contain the violent person.
The researchers criticize such thinking for missing a key to the prevention of prison
violence—the possible reluctance of one party to fight. As Edgar and his colleagues
(2002) argue, it is critical to explore why—not just who, and how—not just how
often—fights and assaults occur. Simply, most fights in prison are assumed to fit
within the rules of engagement. Prison governors presumed that inmates settle their
disputes inevitably by fighting. Only the accounts of people enable us to articulate how
the conflict is understood (or not) by the parties themselves. How else are we going to
confront the rules of engagement?

Challenging the rules of engagement can flow from the way in which victims,
perpetrators, prison guards, and others account for the violence that happens around
them. The many projects of the VRP found creative ways of giving voice to differ-
ent ways of viewing violence. Children living in residential care in England, for
instance, provided graphic explanations on the use of violence, the way it is (or was)
legitimized in their lived environments, and how violence was endemic in negotiat-
ing their way through life (at such a young age; Renold & Barter, 2003). For the
majority of the young people interviewed by these researchers, fighting back was
treated as a form of social justice.

Accounts offered by racist offenders also brought the perspectives of the “harm-
ers” into debates about the “harmed” (Ray, Smith, & Wastell, 2003b). What was
important about the findings of this study interviewing violent offenders included the
way they said they did not act in a racist way when they attacked their victims. These
offenders shared many assumptions about race with other members of their commu-
nities. In many respects, these largely young men were not more racist than some of
their friends and neighbors, they were more violent. Not unlike the perpetrators of
punishment beatings in Northern Ireland, the seeds of the legitimacy of acts of vio-
ence are clearly present in many communities.

Women’s accounts of domestic and sexual violence stress the continuity in
processes for legitimizing the harm that befalls them. Often wrapped in discourses of
heterosexuality, intimacy, and psychological perversity, much violence against women
finds its legitimacy in wider social and community relations. Accounts of violence—
whether women describing a battering, rape, sexual harassment, or other forms of gen-
dered bullying—are accounts of gendered social relations. Much of the work on
violence against women relies on women to tell their stories—and that these stories
reflect patterns of the denial of harm and the legitimacy of “hurting the one you love.”
Women are still told—and still feel—that sexual assault is her fault, and that battering
would stop if she were a good wife. Accounts matter, and so it still matters how care-
fully we as researchers are able to hear what people are saying. Careful analysis of the
voices—of victims, offenders, carers—coupled with the documentation of what hap-
pened enables us to hear the way in which we as society continue to condone violence
through the common discourses people use to explain what happened. To challenge
both its legitimation and its direct harm to individuals, we must understand these discourses as well.

**Concluding Thoughts**

What I found most useful, as a resource from which to draw common threads from an eclectic program of research, was my own research and activist experience and my work on violence against women. The various projects displayed ways in which violence can be made invisible, and the process of denial could be documented. Violence is visible, but the way in which politicians, practitioners, and the public see it often distorts its forms, its impact, its features. As a consequence, different forms of violence are explored separately, as if these phenomena are unique. What is often missing from a general understanding of violence is asking what can be learned from the struggles feminists have waged for decades now against sexual and physical assault. Similarly, those working on racist violence, violence in prisons, violent ethnic conflict, and war all have insight to contribute to the way we can challenge violence against women as well. These lessons from the struggles of feminists and others to challenge violence, I fear, continue to be isolated from each other as knowledge about violence. We need to find a way to bring these dialogues closer together.

The politics of gender equality remain contested ground (and I do not underestimate how much this stifles cooperation). So too do the debates about the politics of hatred, ethnicity, and, these days, fundamentalism and Western imperialism, and how these dovetail with the research and activism on violence against women. But there is always more to learn, to share, and to take back to our communities that daily confront violence. I have offered three synergies from the findings of the VRP: that violence can be studied from its visible features, that gender matters in theorizing and analyzing violence, and that the accounts of people help expose the rules of engagement for violence. These common threads give clues to how we should rethink our theory and our practices to minimize the harm of violence.

**Notes**

1. For a full list of the projects, see www.rhul.ac.uk/sociopolitical-science/vrp/realhome.htm

**References**


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