Black Women and Intimate Partner Violence

New Directions for Research

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African American women are at elevated risk for nonfatal and lethal intimate partner violence (IPV). Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to review our current knowledge, with a focus on the sociodemographic factors that make this population particularly vulnerable to abuse. Future research directions include using more diverse Black samples, considering how living at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression shapes Black women's experience with violence, exploring the influence of historical events and oppressive images on victimization, and focusing on survivors' resilience and activism.

Keywords: battered women; domestic violence; Blacks

Intimate partner violence (IPV) and femicide are an international problem that have been documented among many racial, ethnic, and cultural groups (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). However, in nationally representative studies conducted in the United States, when compared to their White American counterparts, African American women consistently reported higher rates of partner abuse (see Table 1). A growing body of research suggests that race is often a proxy for social class and other structural inequalities. In fact, racial differences in rates of partner abuse frequently disappear, or become less pronounced, when economic factors are taken into consideration (Rennison & Planty, 2003).

Alternatively stated, a consistent demographic profile of victims and perpetrators has emerged: African American couples who are young, undereducated, impoverished, unemployed, urban dwellers (Sorenson, Upchurch, & Shen, 1996). Based on these findings, it should not be concluded that Black

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TABLE 1: National Studies of Black-White Racial Differences in Intimate Partner Violence

Study	Sample Description	Definition/Measure of Abuse	Findings
National Family Violence Survey (Hampton & Gelles, 1994)	Probability sample of 6,002 households	Conflict Tactics Scale; telephone interview	Black wives 2.36 times more likely than Whites to report severe violence
National Survey of Family and Households (Sorenson, Upchurch, & Shen, 1996)	6,779 married White, Black, and Hispanic couples	Self-report of physical violence (hitting, shoving); in-person interviews and survey	Blacks were 1.58 times more likely than Whites to report physical violence
National Alcohol Survey (Cunradi, Caetano, Clark, & Schafer, 1999)	1,440 White, Black, and Hispanic married couples	Conflict Tactics Scale; face-to-face interviews	Male-to-female partner violence higher for Black couples (23%) than White (11%)
Violence Against Women Survey (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000)	8,000 women	Conflict Tactics Scale; telephone interview	Black women (26%) more likely victims of partner violence than White women (21%)
National Crime Victimization Survey (Rennison & Welchans, 2000)	876,340 intimate partner assaults in 1998	Violent acts include murder, rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated and simple assault	Black women's intimate partner victimization 35% higher than White women

Americans are biologically or culturally more prone to violence than other ethnic groups. Rather, these results suggest that African Americans are economically and socially disadvantaged, which places them at greater risk for IPV. Fox, Benson, DeMaris, and Van Wyk (2002) best summarized the association among race, social inequalities, and domestic violence when they wrote,

> At least some of the explanation of the risk of violence to women lies in larger social processes that lead some men and women into social settings that foster early school leaving, early family formation, and work histories that entail numerous spells of unemployment. . . . The fact that it is Black men and Black women who encounter these life circumstances more so than Hispanics and Whites is an indicator of the persistent, structural racism that is deeply institutionalized in this culture. (p. 806)

Although femicide is the seventh leading cause of premature death among women overall, Black women's marginalized status makes them particularly vulnerable. As evidence, murder by intimate partners is the leading cause of death among young African American women between the ages of 15 and 45. Most often, these women were killed by intimate partners, usually with a firearm during the course of an argument (Brock, 2003). As expected, Campbell and associates (2003) discovered that the race of abusers and victims was not associated with partner homicide risk after controlling for demographic factors. Instead, the strongest sociodemographic predictor was the abuser's unemployment. As previously noted, Black men are overrepresented among the unemployed, which may contribute to Black women's elevated murder rate.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

To advance the field, researchers must develop more creative and culturally sensitive theories and methodologies to define, measure, and understand violence in Black communities. More specifically, future researchers should use more diverse Black samples, consider how living at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression shape Black women's experience with violence, explore the influence of historical events and oppressive images on victimization, and focus on survivors' resilience and activism (West, 2002a).

Diversity Among Black Americans

Researchers need to move beyond making Black-White racial comparisons. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2001), approximately 12% of

the population, or 34 million people, identify themselves as African American. This racial group is becoming more diverse as a greater number of immigrants arrive from Africa and Caribbean countries. However, much of our research investigates the experiences of low-income Black women. To advance the field, we also must consider within-group differences. This means more research should focus on how IPV varies among different groups of Black Americans, including social and economic class, age, relationship status (e.g., dating, engaged, married, and divorced couples), sexual orientation (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual), religious affiliation, and HIV status (West, 2002a).

Intersectionality and Multiple Oppressions

Future researchers must be aware that domestic violence is not only gendered but also influenced by racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination, such as homophobia. Alternatively stated, "a middle-class, African American heterosexual Christian woman is not just African American, not just middle-class, not just Christian, and not just female. Instead, her life is located at the intersection of these dimensions" (Phillips, 1998, p. 682). The victim's location in this system of oppression will determine her vulnerability to violence (e.g., poor women are more likely to be victimized), societal perceptions toward her victimization (e.g., belief that ethnic women are not credible victims), and the victim's access to services (e.g., less acculturated or non-English-speaking women receive less assistance) (West, 2002b).

Web of Trauma

Partner abuse is seldom an isolated event for African American women. Their marginalized status places them at increased risk for a wide range of traumatic experiences, including childhood physical and sexual abuse, community violence in the form of witnessing assaults or losing family members to homicide, and racial and sexual harassment in the workplace. Multiple traumatic experiences often compound the negative physical and psychological effects associated with partner violence. Future research needs to investigate a broad range of violence in the lives of Black women (West, 2002b).

Historical Events

The legacy of trauma can be multigenerational, a reality that should not be ignored by future researchers. For example, although they never lived through the atrocities, second- and third-generation family members of Jew-

ish Holocaust survivors also may be traumatized (Danieli, 1998). Similarly, some events continue to live in the collective memory of African Americans, including sexual violence during slavery in the form of rape, forced breeding, and coercive medical experiments, such as the 40-year government sponsored Tuskegee study that withheld treatment from African Americans diagnosed with syphilis. Furthermore, these historical events may influence how contemporary victims respond to IPV. For instance, memories of lynchings and police brutality make some Black women reluctant to report their abusers to a legal system that they perceive as discriminatory (West, 2002b).

Oppressive Images

These images, which are rooted in history, were often used to normalize violence against Black women. For example, when the international slave trade became illegal, rape and forced breeding were used to increase the slave population. Rather than acknowledge this sexual victimization, slave owners portrayed enslaved women as promiscuous, immoral Jezebels who seduced their masters. Consequently, there were no legal or social sanctions against raping Black women (West, 2002b). Even in contemporary times, these stereotypes may lead some to believe that Black women are less credible rape victims (George & Martinez, 2002) and that domestic violence directed toward them is more justified (Gillum, 2002). Although these stereotypes are unpleasant, and often minimized, researchers should explore how they influence personal and institutional responses to Black victims.

Activism and Resistance

Similar to women of other ethnic backgrounds, Black survivors of IPV frequently experience psychological distress in the form of depression, anxiety, stress, and somatic complaints. Despite these challenges, many survivors are resilient. They use community activism, spirituality, music, and literature to promote their healing. There needs to be more research on protective factors and characteristics that are associated with resilience (West, 2002b).

To conclude, more researchers are focusing on racial and ethnic differences in IPV and femicide (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2004). After more than three decades of research, we now know that violence in ethnically diverse families is very similar and, at times, vastly different from the violence experienced by their White counterparts. However, our work is not complete. The next research challenge is to investigate racial similarities without negating the experiences of people of color, while simultaneously highlighting racial differences without perpetuating stereotypes about the

inherent violence of some ethnic groups (West, 2002a). To achieve this intricate balance, investigators, therapists, community members, activists, and survivors must work in collaboration to develop culturally sensitive models and theories that address the complexity of violence in ethnically diverse families.

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