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# THE IMPACT OF CULTURE AND MINORITY STATUS ON WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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*The influence of culture and ethnic background on women's experience of domestic violence has been explored in research only recently. Here the authors review research about the impact of culture and minority status in the United States on women's experience of domestic violence, considering family structure, immigration, acculturation, oppression, and community response. The authors encourage researchers and service providers to acknowledge the effects on women of sociopolitical dynamics, including racism, and to identify specific aspects of culture that are relevant to intimate partner abuse.*

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**Key words:** *culture, domestic violence, worldview, race, ethnicity*

DESPITE THE PROLIFERATION in recent years of research on domestic violence, little attention has been paid to the influence of culture and minority status on women's experience of abuse. Rather than reflecting a disinterest in cross-cultural research, this may point toward a lack of awareness that such research is necessary (Hampton & Gelles, 1994). Largely White feminist efforts have spurred mainstream recognition of domestic violence as a social problem; however, feminism's focus on gender does not always acknowledge the intersection of gender with other social identities, such as race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, or ability status (Lee, 2000).

Other identities may be seen as less important than gender, undermining a researcher's ability to understand how these identities affect women (Sharma, 2001). Researchers may as-

sume that a homogeneous non-White culture exists with universal themes and structures that negate the need for culturally diverse research (Sharma, 2001). Yet conceptual tools used to understand domestic violence do not apply to all cultures. The Power and Control Wheel, created by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (1987), is a common visual aid for understanding violent tactics. However, this model assumes certain aspects of violence that are not present in all groups. For example, none of the main factors of violence (natural order, objectification, submission, force, and coercion) described in the Power and Control Wheel fits within New Zealand's Samoan culture, a culture which does experience domestic violence (Crichton-Hill, 2001).

The lack of emphasis on cultural diversity in research reveals itself in several ways. Research-

ers may overlook or misunderstand ethnic differences by ignoring the presence of different ethnic groups within their samples, by not including varied ethnic groups, or by having minimal sample sizes (Chester, Robin, Koss, Lopez, & Goldman, 1994; Hampton & Gelles, 1994). Measures are rarely developed specifically for diverse populations, so responses may misrepresent an individual's understanding or may not make sense in a particular cultural context (Campbell, Campbell, King, Parker, & Ryan, 1994). Not defining concepts may lead to misunderstandings by participants not familiar with certain terminology (Chester et al., 1994), and those from different ethnic groups may interpret the same words differently (Landrine, Klonoff, & Brown-Collins, 1992). If participants in research are not given a specific definition of *domestic violence*, they may assume that this term refers to any household violence including child abuse or abuse by in-laws (Waller, Risley-Curtiss, Murphy, Medill, & Moore, 1998). Even when they do consider cultural differences, researchers may not specify the aspects of culture that account for such differences (Betancourt & López, 1993).

Comparisons among groups may be invalid if important factors, such as socioeconomic status, are not considered. Disregarding economic factors (or controlling them in quantitative analyses) may create an inaccurate understanding of the prevalence of domestic violence in minority communities because higher levels of violence may be misattributed to cultural factors rather than to the impact of economic disadvantage.

Language barriers and cultural differences may block researchers' connections with a community (Sharma, 2001), and researchers may wonder if it is appropriate to study a community that is not "their own." Even if researchers and participants share an ethnic background, diversity within communities may mean they do not share a common life experience or language. Also, researchers may worry about reinforcing prevailing stereotypes about domestic violence in communities of color (Hampton & Gelles, 1994).

Here we review research on domestic violence among racial and ethnic minority (hereaf-

## KEY POINTS OF THE RESEARCH REVIEW

- Much of the research that purportedly discusses cultural differences may be measuring the effects of racism on the experiences of minority women dealing with abuse.
- Feminism's focus on gender may ignore the intersectionality of social identities and force women to prioritize their gender identity over their racial or ethnic identity when dealing with domestic violence.
- The current body of research on violence against women does not represent the voices of women of color. Much of the literature ignores the presence of ethnic groups in samples, uses inadequate sample sizes and inappropriate measures, and ignores within-group heterogeneity.
- Family structure, acculturation, immigrant status, community response, and histories of oppression affect the experiences of women from minority communities.

ter referred to as *minority*) communities within the United States, both established groups and recent immigrants, and consider several important dimensions of culture and history: family structure, acculturation, immigration status and poverty, community responses, and the larger societal context. Finally, we discuss implications for researchers and service providers working with minority women.

## WHAT IS CULTURE?

*Culture* is defined as a set of characteristics that includes the "beliefs, practices, values, norms, and behaviors that are shared by members of a group" (Sullivan & Rumptz, 1994, p. 567). Culture is inextricably linked with individuals in a group, and its multidimensionality manifests itself in the ways people perceive and interpret their world (Taylor, Magnussen, & Amundson, 2001; Tuck, 1997). This process does not occur randomly but rather, is passed down among generations and might include teachings about a shared heritage, language, style of dress, or food (Yoshihama, 2000). However, culture is not a static phenomenon; individuals interact with their culture so that the culture is constantly challenged and redefined. Cultures contain conflicting elements within groups because not all cultural values are formed at the

same time. Time and place are important constructs that affect culture and its interpretation (Weinstein, 1994). Moreover, on the level of the individual, culture is not a static trait; rather, it is mediated by social cognitive processes (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000).

Varying theoretical perspectives have been employed to understand the construct of culture (Dean, 2001). The modernist view sees culture as a set of shared characteristics, whereas the postmodern standpoint stresses the changeability of culture. The sociopolitical view examines culture in relation to the concepts of oppression and power and is the theoretical framework used (albeit often implicitly) in much of the literature reviewed here. We approach this review from the sociopolitical perspective while at the same time acknowledging the variability and change inherent in culture.

## STUDYING CULTURE

Within the literature, the terms *race*, *ethnicity*, and *culture* are often used interchangeably to describe the experiences of non-White groups and group members (Betancourt & López, 1993). Demographic categories such as racial group membership or ethnicity are used as a proxy for culture because they allow easy categorization of people. These categories, used to collect census data, describe heterogeneous groups of people. No standardized categories of ethnicity distinguish subgroups within these categories, such as Polish or Ukrainian people from members of the dominant White American culture (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000).

Elements of culture such as shared values, traditions, or languages usually are not directly assessed in research that purports to examine culture but rather, are inferred from categorical membership (Betancourt & López, 1993). Nor do many studies that analyze data by ethnic group assess people's degree of ethnic identifi-

cation or cultural beliefs. Nonetheless, researchers who include comparisons of minority communities imply that behaviors measured in their research result from cultural values and tend to ignore within-group variability. Because those categorized as Black include people who have lived and contributed to the creation of American society for centuries as well as recent immigrants from the Caribbean or the African continent, this practice seems unwarranted. These people do not share a cultural background (Sorenson, 1996); rather, what they have in common is their experience of racism as expressed through institutional policies, cultural norms, and prejudicial treatment. What may be measured are shared reactions to these multiple aspects of racism, not their culture.

Although we acknowledge that minority communities are by no means homogeneous, minority women do share common influences when we consider domestic violence within a sociopolitical context. Women in minority communities may experience sexism from within their communities based on their cultural values, beliefs, practices, and so forth. In addition, as members of minority communities, women may be affected by racism from the dominant society (Campbell, Masaki, & Torres, 1997; Chester et al., 1994; Moss, Pitula, Campbell, & Halstead, 1997). Sexism and racism are not mutually exclusive; rather, the intersectionality of their multiple identities complicates minority women's experiences of violence (Sorenson, 1996).

This review examines cultural factors within minority communities that facilitate violence as well as those that protect women. We do not include some aspects of women's lives—such as their sexual orientation, disability status, age, and marital status—not because we disregard their impact but rather, because of significant gaps in the current research literature.

## CULTURE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Some theories that examine the connection between culture and abuse claim that battering is a result of "cultural values, rules, and practices that afford men more status and power than women" (Torres, 1991, p. 115). These val-

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ues predominate in patriarchal societies. Present within many cultures, including the dominant American culture, patriarchy may manifest itself in different ways (Taylor et al., 2001). For example, men typically rule the family in some Arab cultures (Haj-Yahia, 1998), which creates relationships based on power and dominance (Ho, 1990; Sharma, 2001); in American society, men often earn more money than women and may control family finances; anecdotal accounts of the lives of Chinese women often focus on responsibilities to her father, then to her husband, and then to her son (Lee, 2000). These examples illustrate the way that patriarchal values may foster an environment in which violence may flourish, although they do not signify that cultures explicitly condone violence against women.

Although underlying patriarchal values may be widely shared, women from diverse racial and ethnic groups may differ in the types of violence they experience and in their responses to violence (Campbell et al., 1997; Sullivan & Rumptz, 1994). In the African American community, for example, "women are socialized to appear in control in the presence of Anglo Americans," which may make it difficult for women to seek help from shelters staffed by White women (Moss et al., 1997, p. 445). Women may be unwilling to disclose their experience of domestic violence for fear of bringing shame to their families and communities or of reinforcing stereotypes. As a result, when seeking help for domestic violence, women of color may feel they have to place importance on their gender identity above their racial or ethnic identity (Moss et al., 1997; Yoshihama, 2002).

Culture may act as a lens through which people interpret their daily experiences. Although there are many worldviews, two that are often discussed within the U.S. context are the linear and relational worldviews (Cross, 1998). The linear worldview, predominant in mainstream American society, is characterized by a firm belief in cause and effect processes that progress in a logical, forward moving manner. The relational worldview, often attributed to racial and ethnic minority community members, emphasizes the need to balance various forces—for example body, mind, spirit, and context, all of

which are considered interdependent (Cross, 1998). Similarly, individualism emphasizes personal autonomy and independence, whereas collectivism is associated with group loyalty and interdependence (Hui & Triandis, 1986). Interventions developed within a linear/individualist context may be inappropriate for people who experience the world from a relational/collectivist perspective (Parham, 2002).

Low socioeconomic status may complicate the link between culture and domestic violence. Because racism and other oppressive forces that affect ethnic minority women are inextricably linked with class discrimination, research has been unable to separate the effects of cultural background and socioeconomic status (Betancourt & López, 1993). Many women of color feel the combined negative effects of gender, ethnicity, and poverty (Sullivan & Rumptz, 1994), making some researchers question whether socioeconomic status is the more important variable (Hampton & Gelles, 1994). A study of the impact of poverty on women's health conducted by Sutherland, Sullivan, and Bybee (2001) finds a

strong association between poverty and the level of abuse women experience. The confounding of ethnicity and social class makes it difficult to accurately assess the prevalence of domestic violence in communities of color. Ambiguity about prevalence should not indicate that domestic violence is not identified and resisted within minority communities. Indeed, through this resistance, cultures are constantly transformed, belying the notion that cultures are unchanging forces within which women are powerless.

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In addition, cultural scripts may have been manipulated by racism and changed by history

and migration (Chester et al., 1994; Mayo, 1997). An example is machismo, a concept known mainly for its connotations with male superiority and strength. Other important ideas within machismo such as nurturing and caring for children often are not acknowledged (Mayo, 1997). Mainstream understanding of machismo contributes to the unsubstantiated notion that Latino men are more violent, and that domestic violence is more prevalent within these communities. Incomplete comprehension of cultural scripts only reinforces stereotypical

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notions of the lives of minority people.

Not all cultural norms in minority communities are oppressive to women. Although some cultural beliefs may fuel violence, women also gain strength from their culture (Yoshihama, 2000). Women draw on values, religion, beliefs, and practices that help them cope. Such things as cultural celebrations, foods, and art forms can provide comfort and release. Shared values

provide a sense of connection that helps women fight against isolation.

## FAMILY STRUCTURE

Many ethnic minority women live in extended families that may provide social support in the form of emotional comfort, financial resources, child care, and protection for women (Sharma, 2001). The constant presence of a family network reduces the likelihood that a woman may become isolated by her abuser. In addition, respected male and female elders may serve as monitors and inhibitors of abuse (Ho, 1990). Conversely, the extended family structure may also support abuse (Sharma, 2001). More than one family member may batter women, or the presence of other family members may be used as a tool by batterers. In China,

mothers-in-law may attain power in the family because of their association with male figures (Lee, 2000). To uphold the power structure within the family, mothers-in-law may exacerbate their sons' abusive behaviors or may be verbally and physically abusive themselves. A study of Japanese women found that husbands exerted their power by forcing their wives to have sex when other family members could hear, adding another level of humiliation for women (Yoshihama, 2002; Yoshihama & Sorenson, 1994).

The centrality of the family unit affects women in other ways. Acevedo (2000) found that among Mexican women, children were a more important factor in deciding to stay in or leave an abusive relationship than were resident status, language barriers, or money. Women chose to stay because of worries about the economic or psychological effects on their children or chose to leave because the batterer might become violent toward the children (Acevedo, 2000). Taking advantage of these concerns, batterers may threaten to take away children or criticize the woman's skills as a mother (Yoshihama, 2002). The importance of reproduction places another stress on women. The status of Bedouin Arab women is dependent on their reproductive capacity, specifically the number of sons a woman bears (Cwikel, Lev-Wiesel & Al-Krenawi, 2003). Female sexuality is stereotypically seen as passive, mandating male power in the sexual relationship (Cwikel et al., 2003; Sorenson, 1996). These social norms add to the complexity of the woman's experience of violence.

## IMMIGRATION STATUS

For immigrant women, loss of socioeconomic status during the resettlement period creates financial instability (Sharma, 2001). In some cases, newly arrived immigrant women lack the language skills and training to find employment (Ho, 1990). As a result, these women find themselves in a situation where economic survival may be the most pressing issue for themselves and their families. To cope with this situation, some women may take work as unskilled labor in sweatshops (Ho, 1990). Because women

may be employed more easily than their spouses, they then fill the role of primary financial support for the family. Men may use violence to reestablish their position of dominance in the family (Lee, 2000) or out of a sense of shame (Raphael, 2001).

As a result of resettlement, many immigrant women leave behind the social support previously provided by their extended families and communities (Ho, 1990; Mehrotra, 1999; Sharma, 2001; Sorenson, 1996). The option of leaving her abusive spouse, often viewed as the most desirable decision by those who work in the domestic violence field, may seem irrational to a woman who depends on her spouse to provide companionship and a connection to her country of origin (Mehrotra, 1999). She may also feel isolated from the mainstream culture, increasing her reliance on her spouse to navigate everyday situations in a new country (Bui & Morash, 1999).

In dealing with abuse, immigrant women may be reluctant to engage the police or other legal services (Acevedo, 2000; Aldarondo, Kantor, & Jasinski, 2002; Bui, 2003; Bui & Morash, 1999; Campbell et al., 1997; Ho, 1990; Lee, 2000; Sharma, 2001; Sorenson, 1996). Immigrant women may fear police based on previous experiences of mistreatment in their country of origin or occurrences of discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States (Campbell et al., 1997; Ho, 1990; Sharma, 2001). In addition, if they do not speak English, they run the risk that the batterer will be enlisted as translator, negating their chances for a fair intervention (Lee, 2000).

Fear of engaging police and the legal system may also stem from concerns related to undocumented immigration status and deportation. Although the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 provides some protection for undocumented battered women, immigrant women may lack knowledge of these laws (Campbell et al., 1997; Sharma, 2001). The batterer may exploit this fear and use threats of deportation to maintain control (Campbell et al., 1997; Lee, 2000). A woman may believe that contacting police could result in deportation of not only herself and her spouse but also her entire family (Sorenson, 1996). Even women with legal immi-

gration status may fear losing custody of their children in the course of a legal battle with the abuser (Bui, 2003; Sharma, 2001).

Limited knowledge of English, social isolation, and the assumption that services such as hotlines, shelters, and counseling do not exist (based on experiences in her country of origin) make it difficult for some women to get help (Acevedo, 2000; Campbell et al., 1997; Lee, 2000; Mehrotra, 1999; Sharma, 2001; Sorenson, 1996; Yoshihama, 2000). Services that are accessible may not be culturally or linguistically appropriate (Lee, 2000; Sorenson, 1996), making women feel even more isolated. Yoshihama (2000) quoted a 45-year-old Japan-born woman who observed, "As a Japanese, I would keep my feelings inside and endure. Living in the U.S., I cannot use outside services because of language barriers, which makes me even more withdrawn" (p. 219). A study of Vietnamese battered women's help-seeking behaviors revealed that many women specifically avoided agencies that did not have Vietnamese staff because they felt more comfortable speaking with someone with a shared ethnic background (Bui, 2003).

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## ACCULTURATION

Many abused women from cultural and ethnic minorities may be members of the second, third, or fourth generation of their family in the United States. *Acculturation* refers to the adjustment process that takes place as an individual adapts to a new culture. This process includes an evolving relationship to traditional values and beliefs through exposure to the dominant culture (Ho, 1990). Acculturation processes manifest in a variety of ways: through changes in socialization, behaviors, and thought processes including language use (Ho, 1990). However, traditional cultural beliefs and norms may

still be passed down from one generation to the next and continue to exert their influences (Yoshihama, 2000). Moreover, immigrant communities may resist the strong forces of acculturation by maintaining a rigid set of cultural norms enforcing their traditional customs and

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beliefs (Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996). Studies of the relationship between acculturation and levels of abuse have produced mixed findings. Two studies comparing women born in Mexico and those born in the United States find that U.S.-born Mexican women experienced higher rates of violence than their Mexico-born counterparts (Kantor, Jasinski & Aldarondo, 1994; Sorenson & Telles, 1991). A higher level of acculturation may be associated with higher levels of physical and mental problems (Sorenson, 1996), possibly due to loss of social controls, alienation from traditional culture, and discrimination from the dominant culture (Kantor et al., 1994). Conflicting values between the culture of origin and the dominant culture may increase levels of stress for more acculturated individuals (Sorenson, 1996).

In contrast, a study examining the ecology of a largely Mexican population of abused Latinas fails to find a relationship between acculturation and rates of abuse (Perilla, Bakerman, & Norris, 1994), nor does it find that culture moderates the effects of abuse. Battered immigrant women may benefit from an increased level of acculturation because this may be related to higher levels of education in the United States as well as a higher standard of employment. As a result, these women may have greater financial independence and increased access to mainstream services (Bui, 2003). The contradic-

tory findings from these studies may reflect the use of invalid measures of acculturation.

Intact cultural norms may be a source of strength for abused women (Kantor et al., 1994). Values such as family harmony or unity may decrease the stresses that can cause family violence. Culturally congruent strategies for dealing with abuse may also be effective. Yoshihama (2002) found that Japan-born women tended to suffer less psychological distress when employing "passive" coping strategies that matched certain cultural values, focusing on the positive aspects of the relationship or doing things to calm down. U.S.-born Japanese women tended to use more active strategies such as confronting their partners, seeking help, or leaving the situation and perceived those strategies to be more effective methods of coping with their abuse.

## OPPRESSION

Minority women may suffer abuse not only from their partners but also from the larger society. Racial and ethnic discrimination, anti-immigrant sentiment, and social class bias are forces that may affect the daily lives of minority women (Campbell et al., 1997). The current emphasis on multiculturalism focuses primarily on understanding cultural beliefs and traditions rather than looking at the patterns of oppression and struggle that characterize the history of many minority groups (Dean, 2001). Social services, psychology, and the social sciences in general may reflect a narrow understanding of the world that is based on the experiences of White, European American middle-class people (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994).

Fine (1989) described her experience as a White rape crisis advocate working with a young African American woman. Acting as a competent, knowledgeable advocate, Fine encouraged this woman to employ coping strategies such as pressing charges, seeing a counselor, or talking to her family, all of which the woman rejected. These strategies reflect the take-control methods of coping that can be very effective for people with high social status, namely middle- to upper-class, White individuals. The woman that Fine was working with was a lower-class Black woman with very little so-

cial power. Her rejection of these strategies reflected her realistic assessment of her situation: The police would not believe her, counseling might help temporarily but could not change her living situation, and her family would be angered and try to kill the perpetrators.

The history of specific ethnic groups in the United States may shape women's reactions to abuse. African American history includes experiences of systematic oppression such as slavery, lynching, denial of civil liberties, police brutality, and limited economic and educational opportunities (Oliver, 2000). This history of systematic subjugation has fostered a deeply ingrained sense of mistrust of the criminal justice system. African American women are reluctant to bring White people "into their business" for fear of being seen as traitors to their community (Moss et al., 1997; Richie, 1985). Batterers may blame their abusive behavior on the racial discrimination they have suffered at the hands of the criminal justice system (Campbell et al., 1997). African American women who decide to leave their abusers may find that racist practices limit their ability to obtain housing, employment, and job training. As a result, they may have a hard time mobilizing the resources needed to build a new life (Sullivan & Rumpetz, 1994).

Other minority groups also are affected by a history of oppression. Japanese internment during World War II, hate crimes, and punitive immigration laws have colored the experiences of Asian Americans (Ho, 1990; Yoshihama, 2000), whereas Native peoples in the United States have faced the decimation of the population, removal from ancestral lands, and denial of their rights to spiritual and religious practice. Outsiders have determined Native peoples' needs, identities, and realities since colonization began (Chester et al., 1994; Waller et al., 1998). As with other minority groups, the Native woman abused by her partner has few options when faced with a criminal justice system that has been at best unresponsive and at worst has contributed to the genocide of her people (Waller et al., 1998). Hispanic or Latina abused women may be affected by historical patterns of colonization and alienation.

Societal forces outlined above may limit the ability of women of color to leave abusive relationships. Sharma (2001) challenged feminist therapists to move beyond sexism and begin to examine their own "subtle racist and classist assumptions" (p. 1412). Failure to do so means women of color must decide whether or not to engage with another potentially racist system: that of domestic violence intervention (Ho, 1990).

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## COMMUNITY RESPONSE

In an attempt to preserve cultural values, many communities encourage women not to leave violent relationships or to stay silent and deny abuse. Many minority women have to choose between staying in a violent situation or leaving and being ostracized by their community (Campbell et al., 1997; Dasgupta & Warriar, 1996). Implicit restrictions may limit access to resources, and explicit statements of judgment can silence women (Campbell et al., 1997; Sorenson, 1996). Reporting abuse may be seen as a mechanism to tear the community apart, because most official ways of reporting involve outsiders. As a result, sometimes issues are handled within the community (Campbell et al., 1997). Individuals in important roles (such as elder members of the community or religious figures) may shape the community response depending on how they react to domestic violence. Although community norms may restrict women, organized grassroots resistance against violence may be a source of strength. Much of the organizing on violence against women in minority communities has come from within those communities. Women may gather to share experiences and through these gatherings, a growing recognition of a common experience of violence may motivate women to

organize against violence in various ways (Richie, 1985).

Attempts to organize a response to violence have resulted in shelters created by local women for women in that community (Campbell et al., 1994). In this way, women are able to receive services in their own language from people who understand their culture-specific

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needs. Preisser (1999) described the creation of the Asian Women's Self-Help Association, a community-based organization created by South Asian women to address concerns about violence in their community. In Chicago alone, there are six programs addressing violence against women that were created by grassroots organizing

in minority communities.

Other examples of social change have focused on public education. The San Francisco Filipina Advisory Committee used storytelling to combine facts and resources about violence against women. This handbook was a successful educational tool for the community (Campbell et al., 1994). In Boston, community leaders and advocates joined forces to create a video about domestic violence in the Cambodian community. Combining family and community values, the video focuses on the effects of violence on the community as a whole (Campbell et al., 1994).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The first step in doing research on domestic violence in minority communities is to examine whether concepts applicable to one group also apply to others. To establish construct validity, researchers should grapple with terminology and definitions. Terms such as *domestic violence*, *intimate partner violence*, or *family violence* have specific conceptual implications (Chester et al., 1994). Some studies may be designed to explore how specific cultural values, such as collectiv-

ism or religiosity, shape women's experiences of domestic violence, whereas others may measure the moderating effect of racism by comparing the experiences of minority women with those of White women.

## Sampling

Researchers should include varied minority group members in their studies if they want to claim that their research on domestic violence is valid across cultures (Hampton & Gelles, 1994). Sample sizes sufficient to represent the voices of minorities are necessary if the findings of studies cannot be assumed to generalize ("NIJ Broadening Our Understanding," n.d.). Moreover, researchers must acknowledge the heterogeneity of groups who have been artificially lumped into designated racial/ethnic categorizations (Sorenson, 1996). Even within minority groups, women's experiences of domestic violence may differ greatly.

## Collaboration

Researchers who study domestic violence in particular communities can enlist the aid of community informants to learn about the experiences, values, and relational patterns of community members. Community insiders can provide valuable information about the community and help the researcher identify and gain access to important people, such as religious leaders, community organizers, or community elders (Birman, 2002). Researchers who are not insiders may need to spend time immersed in the community being studied to gain experiential knowledge of aspects of community life (Fiske, 1995).

## Measurement Tools

Surface level changes in measurement, such as simple translation and back translation of questionnaires, are often inadequate (Lopez, 2001). Even after translations have been completed and confirmed through back translation, colloquial phrases may not have the same meaning across cultures. It is necessary to recreate measures that tap into the ideas the original

measure was designed to address. Culturally appropriate measures of women's experiences of domestic violence may still examine factors such as duration or type of violence, but the measures should be written using language familiar to the women being studied. In addition, if the researcher is measuring the relationship of culture to domestic violence, it is important to identify the relevant aspect(s) of culture (e.g., family structure, acculturation, child-rearing practices, etc.; Betancourt & López, 1993) and to assess those with appropriate measures. If this is not done, then findings should not be attributed to cultural factors.

The use of focus groups may deepen the researcher's understanding of the way certain phenomena are understood by community members (Hughes & DuMont, 1993). Because focus group interview protocols typically are open ended, researchers may gain unanticipated information. Discussing experiences may also generate community support for survivors by breaking the silence about domestic violence.

Even the form measures take can affect the researcher's ability to accurately interpret responses. For instance, scaled measures that require participants to make strong negative judgments may be inappropriate in some communities. Negativity may be seen as antithetical to worldviews in which endurance through struggle is valued over complaints. As a result, researchers may not get an accurate picture of the severity or the impact of violence on minority women in their study (Loo, 1991).

### ***Acknowledging Oppression***

Minority communities are often targets of discrimination and systematic oppression from the larger society, and women may experience sexism from within their communities. Researchers should acknowledge that minority women must deal with the multiplicative forces of racism and sexism as they respond to domestic violence (Lee, 2000; Sharma, 2001).

Minority study participants may greet researchers with suspicion because of past experiences with harmful or exploitive practices. One notorious historical example is the Tuskegee ex-

periment, in which African American men with syphilis were denied treatment in the name of scientific research (Jones, 1993). More recent examples may include the use of untranslated consent forms with non-English speaking women. Researchers should be aware of the power differential between researchers and participants that might replicate oppressive dynamics (Riger, 1999).

Researchers should also consider whether a study's design might lead to the stigmatization of marginalized communities. Studies that compare the behaviors of minority women in abusive relationships to behavioral norms based on the experiences of White women may imply that minority group members are deviant. Researchers working from a White cultural paradigm may consider certain coping styles to be maladaptive and may label women as "weak" or overly dependent. However, a culturally congruent coping style may contribute to women's overall sense of mental health and well-being (Yoshihama, 2002). Cross-cultural comparison studies should acknowledge varying contextual influences such as racism, immigration status, and ethnocentrism (Hamby, 2000). Findings of difference should be interpreted with these factors in mind to avoid further pathologizing already marginalized communities (Albee, 1996).

Finally, researchers must recognize the impact of their visual stimulus on members of these groups. Whether the researcher is a White woman or a man of any color, minority women may react to the researcher based on past experiences. It is impossible to give up one's position as a member of the dominant group. However, awareness of one's own power and privilege is an important step in forging relationships with

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community members and conducting respectful research (Hamby, 2000).

### **Action Research**

Researchers interested in alleviating the impact of violence on women in minority communities should consider conducting action research; that is, research whose purpose is contributing to a social change effort (Hamby, 2000). Kulwicki and Miller (1999) used critical social theory (which has as its main objective the liberation of oppressed groups) to inform their research on domestic violence attitudes in an Arab American community. Given that research is driven by the values and biases of those conducting it, researchers should not be afraid to make their political motivations explicit (Albee, 1996; Rappaport, 1977).

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

### **Reflecting the Community**

Effective strategies for serving minority women involve efforts to reflect the community. Hiring staff that share the backgrounds of the clients being served in domestic violence shelters can make clients feel more comfortable (Bui, 2003; Ho, 1990; Sharma, 2001; Sullivan & Rumptz, 1994). Bilingual staff members may provide services in the client's primary language. In addition, shelter staff can be mindful of the specific needs of the client, such as dietary guidelines or clothing preferences (Sorenson, 1996). Shelter staff members are not expected automatically to know these needs; however, they must be willing to do outreach and ask the community for ways to make the shelter more accessible and inviting (Sullivan & Rumptz, 1994).

### **Developing Cultural Competence**

Hiring diverse staff is not the only way that organizations can address the need for cultural competence and is not always feasible. Nonminority staff members can deepen their knowledge and understanding of the forces

that affect their clients' lives. For instance, Moss et al. (1997) encouraged nurse practitioners to discuss racism and oppression with their clients and to be familiar with the levels of cultural competence of those agencies to which they refer clients. In addition, providers should be aware of changes in immigration law and make this information accessible to affected clients (Sharma, 2001).

### **Acknowledging Complexities**

Women may have multiple concerns that affect the decisions they make. A woman should not be forced to choose one issue over the other—for instance, fear of isolation from her community versus fear of her abuser (Campbell et al., 1997). Interventions can employ cultural values or practices that women identify as empowering (Ho, 1990), such as Asian women engaging with elders or Native women using stories to help the healing process. Long-term services for minority women could include support groups for women who share the same cultural backgrounds and involve the entire family (Acevedo, 2000; Sharma, 2001; Yoshihama, 2002).

Perhaps most important is the need to reframe perspectives when working with minority women. Waller et al. (1998) described the current approach used by counselors and social workers working with Native women as deficit focused. Native women's stories are frequently interpreted in terms of weaknesses, bad decisions, and dysfunction. Instead, these stories may reflect resistance and resilience (Kasturirangan & Williams, 2003; Waller et al., 1998) and practitioners can draw on these strengths to help survivors develop culturally congruent ways of coping (Yoshihama, 2002).

### **Making Prevention Culturally Relevant**

Oliver (2000) discussed the merits of using Black popular culture as part of a comprehensive prevention agenda in the African American community, allowing messages to be conveyed with cultural authenticity. In immigrant communities, prevention messages cannot simply be translated into different languages but

rather, must have meaning within the context of the community being targeted (Campbell et al., 1997). Emphasizing family strength rather than individual actions may be appropriate in communities that are interdependent.

### ***Reaching Out Effectively***

Outreach to minority communities can be made more effective by finding out where women gather. Service providers who engage in dialogue with women in churches, beauty salons, or ethnic grocery stores can find out what kind of services would be most useful (Sharma, 2001). Focus groups can be used to get a clearer understanding of the way a problem is defined within a community (Hughes & Dumont, 1993). Successful outreach to marginalized communities depends on an agency's willingness to create agendas that fit into and are not forced onto the communities it wishes to engage (Shreffler, 1999).

### ***Grassroots Organizing***

Practitioners can support local grassroots efforts by sharing resources and working in collaboration with community groups or allowing these groups to continue their work without interference. Practitioners who are not members of the community should respect the needs and wishes of these community groups and take a learning stance when working with them. Increased grassroots consciousness raising is also necessary (Ho, 1990). This might entail discus-

sion groups or community forums. Service providers can support community elders and leaders who begin the hard work of addressing violence against women (Campbell et al., 1997; Ho, 1990). These processes promote change from within and allow communities to claim ownership of the issue being addressed (Oliver, 2000).

## **CONCLUSION**

To hear the voices of those who remain marginalized in our society, researchers and social service providers must take up the challenge of broadening their own perceptions of the world (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). An understanding of the combined impact of racism and sexism on minority women's experiences of domestic violence will result in research that more fully describes women's experiences. Identifying specific aspects of culture and assessing ethnic identification will move research beyond simply grouping people by demographic categories. This knowledge may open opportunities for new prevention and intervention efforts as well as make existing research and services more responsive to women's needs.

**An understanding of the combined impact of racism and sexism on minority women's experiences of domestic violence will result in research that more fully describes women's experiences.**

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH**

### ***Practice***

- Services intending to address the needs of ethnic minority women should attempt to hire staff members that reflect the community, provide language appropriate services, and be open to suggestions from community members concerning ways to make services more accessible.
- Service providers should acknowledge societal forces that may affect the lives of their minority clients as well as their ability to access resources.
- Service providers should be aware of the history and cultural practices and values of the communities they serve and use this information to engage the client more effectively and to better understand the client's perspective.
- Service providers should consult with community members and organizations to develop nontraditional methods of outreach that respect community values and practices.

## Research

- It is necessary to incorporate methods that value and reflect the realities of all women and to adapt and develop more appropriate tools of measurement.
- Researchers must challenge their assumptions about communities and attempt to learn about the experiences and values of the community.
- Researchers must begin to accept the heterogeneity of groups who have been artificially lumped into designated racial/ethnic categorizations.
- Researchers should be aware of and avoid replicating oppressive power dynamics.

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## SUGGESTED FUTURE READINGS

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