The Not-So-Obvious Psychology of Domestic Violence Perpetrators: The Personality Reviewed

The Abusive Personality: Violence and Control in Intimate Relationships
by Donald G. Dutton
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Review by Christopher Murphy

Donald Dutton's most recent book, *The Abusive Personality,* promises to have a wide influence on practice and research with domestic violence perpetrators. One of Dutton's previous books, *The Domestic Assault of Women* (1995), is among the most comprehensive and coherent works on the topic of wife abuse. *The Abusive Personality* is written in a more popular and conversational style. The book reflects the maturing of this area of inquiry from descriptive toward explanatory studies of abuse perpetrators. Unlike *The Domestic Assault of Women,* which was relatively comprehensive in its coverage of empirical work on this topic, *The Abusive Personality* presents a highly selective review. The book stays true to its central purpose of providing a new theory of domestic abuse perpetration. The central assertion is that domestic abuse, at least for a prominent subgroup of abusers, results from the cyclical and unstable dynamics of the borderline personality. The only exception to the book's clear focus is the final chapter, a brief overview of treatment for abusers, which unfortunately, is only tangentially related to the theory presented earlier in the book.

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The book begins with a fairly extensive critique of the major theoretical formulations of domestic violence perpetration, including feminist, social learning, biological, and sociobiological approaches. Dutton makes the point that none of these approaches can account for the syndrome of abuse, which includes "rising and falling tensions, and shifting phases of emotion, perspective, and attitude" (p. 52). He argues that the disturbance involves character structure, and is therefore more pervasive and deeper than implied by social learning theories and neuropsychiatric conceptions of uncontrolled rage reactions.

The book then turns to the specific conceptual background for a new theory of the abusive personality. Much is owed to Lenore Walker's descriptive studies of the cyclical nature of domestic violence. The cycle involves a tension-building phase, an acute battering phase, and a contrition or "loving respite" phase (Walker, 1979). In looking for a psychological explanation of this cycle, Dutton turned to the literature on borderline personality disorder and noticed many similarities to the clinical descriptions of domestic abusers. He arrived at a central argument, namely that the cyclical domestic abuser suffers from borderline personality organization, a continuously distributed trait version of the diagnostic category of borderline personality disorder. Like the domestically violent individual, the borderline personality is characterized by anger, impulse control problems, deep concerns with abandonment, intense dysphoria, and cyclical changes in attitude and emotion that are often manifested in intense relationship conflict. A history of childhood trauma is also quite common for both domestic abusers and individuals with borderline personality disorder.

The primary empirical support for this argument derives from correlations, within samples of abusive males, between a self-report measure of borderline personality organization and self-report measures of physical and emotional abuse perpetration, anger, "fearful" (i.e., anxious and angry) attachment, trauma symptoms, and rejection in childhood. Sizeable correlations between the spouse's report of abusive behavior and the abuser's self-report of borderline personality are also presented. Dutton mentions differences in borderline personality organization between abusers and nonabusive controls, but this specific finding is not elaborated.

Another important facet of Dutton's theory involves the developmental origins of the abusive personality. His perspective, derived from object relations theory, maintains that intimate rage derives from the preoedipal defensive process of splitting. Rage, at the unconscious level, is directed toward the frustrating "bad mother" image, which has not been developmentally integrated with the nurturing "good mother" image. Bowlby's attachment theory is also used to explain the developmental origins of insecurity in relationships and the tendency to express insecurity in the form of anger and coercive control.

Empirical support for these assertions involves correlations, again within a sample of clinically violent men, of self-reported attachment insecurities with emotionally abusive behavior, anger, and borderline personality organization. No data are provided on physical abuse perpetration in this section of the book. The author claims that these three components—anger, attachment insecurities, and borderline personality organization—form the core of the abusive personality. Finally, the author presents some data on recollections of domestic violence in the family of origin and of rejecting and shaming behaviors by the parents. Again, within the sample of abusive men, he shows that these childhood experiences are correlated with abusive behavior in current adult relationships and with the core features of the abusive personality

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(anger, borderline personality organization, and fearful attachment).

The book presents a thoughtful, coherent view of the personality dynamics and developmental antecedents of domestic abuse—at least the abuse perpetrated by a clinical subgroup who go through cycles of tension building, battering, and contrition. A number of difficult and thorny issues can be raised, however, about (a) aspects of the abusive personality that are not addressed; (b) transient, situational, and contextual factors in domestic abuse perpetration; and (c) limitations of the empirical support for the proposed model of the abusive personality.

Is There Such a Thing as "the" Abusive Personality?

There is a troubling inconsistency regarding the generality and scope of the abusive personality hypothesis. Is this a theory of all domestic abuse, or only of a certain type of abuser? The book's Introduction indicates that the borderline abuser is only one of several types identified in earlier work by the author and others. In Dutton's scheme, the other groups are overcontrolled abusers who have avoidant personality styles and psychopathic abusers who have generalized problems with violence and antisocial behavior. Those who cycle through abusive phases and whose violence is highly impulsive (rather than instrumental), form the explicit target for the abusive personality hypothesis. In the chapter on treatment, Dutton provides an estimate of their prevalence, stating that "a group of 12 clients may have 3 men who go through abuse cycles" (p. 171). Notably, this 25 percent figure is consistent with diagnostic research on the prevalence of borderline personality disorder among abusers (Hart, Dutton, & Newlove, 1993).

Yet, both the title of the book and the empirical support for the main hypotheses are directed toward all abusive individuals, rather than a specific subgroup. For example, the investigation comparing abuse perpetrators with controls on a self-report measure of borderline personality organization was conducted on a heterogeneous sample of abusers, as were the studies which purport to place borderline personality organization at center stage in explaining the dynamics of the abusive personality. When viewed in this light, the strong associations between borderline personality problems and other negative features, such as anger, abuse levels, and problems in the family-of-origin, do not necessarily support Dutton's argument for the centrality of the borderline personality to domestic abuse. Alternatively, these findings could be taken to indicate that the subtype of abusers who have borderline features also have more problems with anger, emotional abuse, and attachment than do other types of abusers—not a very controversial point given the intense interpersonal dysfunction associated with the borderline syndrome.

The Importance of Antisocial Personality Characteristics

By focusing on borderline personality organization as the unifying theme of the abusive personality, Dutton ignores a wide range of evidence on antisocial personality characteristics in this population. For example, in a study of clinical abuse perpetrators, Hart and colleagues (1993) found that antisocial and aggressive-sadistic personality problems were more prevalent than borderline personality problems on the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-II (MCMI-II) and structured diagnostic interviews. Similarly, with statistical control for the MCMI-II debasement factor, which reflects a general sense of malaise and emotional distress, the only significant differences between abusers and nonviolent men involved antisocial, aggressive-sadistic, passive-aggressive, and drug abuse scales (Murphy, Meyer & O'Leary, 1993). Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory results likewise indicate that the most common profiles generated by domestic abuse perpetrators involve primary elevations on Scales 4 (Psychopathic Deviate) and 2 (Depression), a pattern that "usually indicates a psychopathic or antisocial personality, with depressive features that seem to be produced by specific situations and are often short lived" (Hale, Zimostrad, Duckworth, & Nicholas, 1988, p. 217). Finally, a recent prospective study of a large New Zealand birth cohort indicated that antisocial problem behaviors in childhood and adolescence, including substance abuse, were the most robust predictors of intimate partner violence in young adulthood (Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva, 1998).

Fundamentally, the book presents no data on variables other than borderline personality organization as rival hypotheses regarding the core features of the abusive personality. It remains quite plausible that antisocial features could produce a pattern of correlations that looks very similar to that provided in support of the borderline personality model. Thus, the relevant tests to support a core personality dysfunction associated with the behavioral syndrome of domestic abuse have yet to be conducted.

Situational Factors and the Interactionist Perspective on Personality

Following Bronfenbrenner's seminal work on child development, Dutton's prior work (1995) emphasized a multilayered, ecosystemic approach to understanding domestic abuse. Large-scale influences, such as sexist dynamics and violent influences in the culture, were integrated with other contextual and personal factors in understanding abusive behavior. In stark contrast to this contextual model, *The Abusive Personality* downplays situational and cultural factors in domestic abuse. All phenomena associated with abusive behavior are boiled down to a central character flaw. Although Dutton's model is consistent with clinical conceptions of severe personality dysfunction, it is fundamentally inconsistent with modern personality theories that stress the interplay of situational factors and personality traits. Contextual influences interact with more stable and consistent response tendencies to determine important behavioral expressions. The notion that domestic abuse is purely a response to internal stimuli, although provocative, is almost certainly inadequate as a complete account for this complex behavioral problem.

In Defense of a Biopsychosocial Model

Perhaps it is unfair to expect that a book describing a specific theory of the abusive personality would provide sufficient coverage of other theories or other levels of analysis. In fact, the introductory chapters summarily dismiss the major theories of domestic violence—feminist, social learning, biological, evolutionary and sociobiological. Although the author points out important limitations to each of these approaches, the book fails to recognize their potential contributions to a synthetic and coherent understanding of domestic violence. Feminist theories, for example, cannot account very well for abuse in lesbian relationships, or for the fact that only some men, and not others, are domestically violent. Yet, it is certainly more than a coincidence that every abusive participant in Dutton's empirical studies is male. There is an extensive historical record of legal and social provisions to support the domestic assault of women by men. Theories that account for individual differences in the perpetration of intimate partner violence can complement knowledge about historical and cultural influences without supplanting these approaches.

Biological and evolutionary theories of domestic violence also get short shrift in *The Abusive Personality*. For example, Dutton focuses on an overly simplistic notion that rage reactions, if biologically determined, should be random, rather than directed against specific targets such as intimate partners. There are several major problems with this argument. First, many abusers do not limit their rage and violent reactions to intimate partners, instead they display a pattern of generalized violence toward people within and outside of the home. Second, rage directed at particular targets and not others is consistent with a model in which biological factors contribute to a reduced threshold for aggression, but only a limited range of environmental factors provide sufficient stimulation to cross the threshold. Finally, the emphasis on an outmoded notion of explosive and uncontrolled rage reactions ignores the extensive evidence linking low serotonin levels to impulsive human aggression. Models involving neurotransmitter systems imply more complex, probabilistic, and moderated associations with aggressive behavior, quite unlike the notion that focal lesions or seizures produces an uncontrolled and undirected rage reaction (Berman, Tracy, & Coccaro, 1997).

In dismissing the sociobiological perspective, Dutton argues that "males are not more abusive in general than are females" (p. 22), although later he notes that comparing male and female aggression is "like comparing a head-on collision to a fender bender" (p. 28). This inconsistency arises from the unexplored distinction between topography and function in the analysis of behavior. With respect to behavioral topography (or form), it is true that males and females, at least in the United States, engage in similar rates of behaviors, such as slapping, pushing, grabbing, or hitting one another (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Yet sociobiological theorists (as well as feminist theorists and operant behaviorists) are more concerned with function than with form when it comes to intimate partner violence. Research on the effects of partner violence highlights substantial gender differences in the recipient's experience of physical injury and perceived negative impact (Cascardi, Langhinrichsen, & Vivian, 1992; Stets & Straus, 1990). These differential effects are consistent with the sociobiological assumption that partner violence has had different implications for reproductive success among males versus females.

Summary and Conclusion

Despite some confusion about the scope of the abusive personality hypothesis, and notwithstanding the limitations of the empirical foundation for this model, *The Abusive Personality* makes an important contribution to our understanding of domestic violence. It provides an integrative and theoretically rich perspective on the not-so-obvious psychological aspects of domestic violence perpetrators. Attachment insecurities, inconsistencies in identity and affect, and intense dysphoria provide important emotional underpinnings to the expression of coercive control in intimate relationships. This main point is not entirely new, however, having been emphasized in earlier theoretical and empirical work on factors, such as low self-esteem, anxious and insecure attachment, dysphoric reactions, and dependency characteristics among abuse perpetrators. Nevertheless, *The Abusive Personality* provides the most comprehensive account yet available of the core personality features associated with this vexing pattern of abusive behavior among individuals with intense personal inadequacies, emotional instability, and insecurity that are often linked to a history of childhood trauma. This model, however, remains confined to a specific level of analysis, namely intraindividual personality dynamics. Thus, Dutton's model may complement, but cannot supplant, the understanding of cultural and historical influences, relationship system dynamics, situational factors, and biological influences that contribute to a multilevel analysis of this profound social problem. ❑

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