

Struggling with theory and theoretical struggles¹

An appropriately poignant image of the knower (and especially of the theorist) is that of a rope walker who, on arriving at a precipice of ignorance, ties one end of a chain of inferences to a stake on its brink, and flinging the free end as far as possible out over the abyss, runs quickly along the thrown chain to get the maximum distance before plunging to disaster. Limited knowledge representations being all we have, the only thing worse than generating and using them is not doing so.

(McGuire 1983)

On 14 December 1989 in the late afternoon, the media reported that Marc Lepine, a man in his early twenties, had murdered fourteen women at the *École polytechnique*, the engineering school of the University of Montreal. At the end of his shooting spree, he killed himself. As more of the details of that afternoon were released, news commentators were preoccupied with questions of motive. For many in the feminist community, the answer was horrifyingly clear: Lepine had made a political statement that pushed violence against women to its ultimate expression – mass murder. What feminists encountered after the event was the backlash that arises when an act of male violence towards an individual woman is viewed as an action with political dimensions, that is, an action against women collectively. In the field of social psychology, Ken Gergen has used the term ‘generative theorizing’ to capture something of the struggle that I would argue took place when feminists challenged individualistic accounts of Marc Lepine’s actions. Gergen has described generative theorizing in the following way:

It may be useful, then, to consider competing theoretical accounts in terms of their generative capacity, that is, the capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is ‘taken for granted’, and thereby to furnish new alternatives for social action. It is the generative theory that can provoke debate, transform social reality, and ultimately serve to reorder social conduct.

(Gergen 1978: 1346)

We now know that Marc Lepine had intended to kill prominent feminists. One of them, journalist Francine Pelletier, released a part of his suicide note that in Lepine’s own words crystallized the political link between gender and aggression in his troubled mind:

Please note that if I commit suicide today . . . it is not for economic reasons . . . but for political reasons. For I have decided to send [to the death] the feminists who have always ruined my life, to their Maker. . . . Even if the Mad Killer epithet will be attributed to me by the media, I consider myself a rational erudite [person]. . . . Being rather backward-looking by nature [except for science], the feminists always have a talent to enrage me. They want to keep the advantages of women [e.g. cheaper insurance, extended maternity leave preceded by a preventive retreat etc.] while trying to grab those of the men.

(*Toronto Globe and Mail*: 27 November 1990)

The full note was followed by a ‘hit list’ of the names of nineteen women with the added comment: ‘Nearly died today. The lack of time (because I started too late) has allowed those radical feminists to survive’. Instead of murdering high-profile feminist activists, Lepine acted against women engineering students whose inroads into a male-dominated world might just as easily have fed his rage.² In one lecture hall filled with male and female students, he shouted, ‘Women to one side. You are all feminists. I hate feminists.’ One survivor reported how she attempted to reason with him by saying, ‘We are only women in engineering who want to live a normal life’ (Lakeman 1990: 20).

In the days that followed the massacre, feminist activist Lee Lakeman (1990) analysed the news media’s tendency to avoid viewing Lepine’s actions as an expression of male violence towards women and the women’s movement. The Canadian news media individualized Lepine’s actions and portrayed him as a madman acting out a brutal scenario. Lakeman described how women across Canada mobilized vigils and resisted the media’s attempts to present women as overreacting. Her analysis did not gloss over the differences in women’s political understanding of the crime. She documented the words of one woman who came to mourn because ‘the murder of any woman is a reason to organize’ whereas other women stayed away ‘vowing that, until the murder of poor women, native women, runaways and prostitutes causes public outcry, they will put their energy elsewhere’ (Lakeman 1990: 22).

One year later, the polarization of feeling around the deaths of the Montreal women and the meaning of Lepine’s actions remained. The term ‘chilly climate’ has been increasingly used to describe the atmosphere at Canadian universities. Shortly after the murders in 1989, for example, a poster with lace and roses in the background appeared across many Canadian university campuses. The text reads:

14 women died
in Montreal
December 6, 1989.
97 women died
in domestic violence
in 1988 in Canada.
First mourn.
Then work for change.

Almost one year later, at my university, a copy of the poster was found defaced. Someone had drawn the scope of a gun in the centre of the poster and bullet holes in two other places. Dave Naylor, then editor-in-chief of the Carleton student newspaper, *The Charlatan*, reflected on the significance of this action:

The 'artist', no doubt a male, obviously wants to send a message to women. The message? that there are lots more Marc Lepines out there, and there is a little bit of Marc Lepine in all men. I don't happen to believe this is true. . . . I think almost every male hates Marc Lepine for what he did to the relationships between sexes, as well as for his atrocities against humanity. No male wants to be represented even in the slightest way by such a horrifying symbol. . . . How can women be convinced Marc Lepine is not in any way representative of males? How can we express our compassion for the loss of women's lives?

(Naylor 1990: 12)

This passage raises many questions that challenge the 'taken for granted' view that Marc Lepine's actions are best understood as 'madness'. In fact, by asking 'Is there a little bit of him in all men?' an analytical framework is generated that contextualizes Lepine's actions in the study of men's daily lives and the cultural construction of masculinity. In my view, feminist theorizing over the past twenty-five years has shifted our understanding to a point where this question among others becomes quite important. Who are the men who identify with Lepine? Who are the men who oppose him by working towards equality for women in their personal and political lives? Feminist theorizing over the past twenty-five years has shifted our understanding to a point where we can now ask these new questions about men and masculinity.

Traditionally, when the question of why men violate women's bodies and lives were asked, the answers given were individualized and blame was located with women themselves. Psychological theories of violence towards women operating at this individualized level of analysis often left women doubly victimized. However, theorizing male violence towards women has evolved over the past twenty-five years since the late 1960s when feminists began a systematic study of rape. Before then, rape

was studied from a perspective of individual psychology and mental health; it was seen as sexually motivated and female-precipitated (Albin 1977). This perspective was bolstered by psychoanalytic writings, by studies of the psychopathology of incarcerated rapists, and by the new field of victimology (Clark and Lewis 1977). Susan Schechter (1982) has described a similar history of theories for explaining wife-battering.

Throughout the 1970s to the present, many feminist researchers developed their work alongside or outside of mainstream social psychological thinking and research. This was only partially a result of the omission of women as subjects or targets in the experimental analogues of social psychological research on interpersonal aggression (Frodi *et al.* 1977). I would argue that mainstream social psychology simply did not tell us what we needed and wanted to know.

More fully, there are several reasons why I think some feminist researchers did not pursue the idea of adding women to the highly stylized aggression paradigms they encountered in the early 1970s.³ First, a simple 'add women' alteration to the practice of laboratory work in social psychology would not provide detailed information about the range and commonness of experiences women have with male violence. Only listening to women who have experienced violence could yield that information. A change from laboratory to survey and interview methods better suited the knowledge required and marks a substantial shift in scientific practice among feminist researchers. Second, as detailed knowledge of women's experience accrued, the symmetry assumed by the factorial design in traditional laboratory aggression paradigms was not an accurate way to represent that knowledge. Knowledge gained from talking with women challenged the idea that male violence towards women bears much in common *quantitatively* and *qualitatively* with inter-sex violence and/or female violence towards men. Third, by conducting studies that reduce the experience of violence in women's lives to a laboratory paradigm that stresses antecedent-consequent relationships, there is an implicit agreement to an investigative practice that produces generalizations about female-precipitated violence. Men's behavioural responses are further legitimated as 'natural' reactions to the provoking stimuli (Dutton 1986). Women's accounts of violence suggest that their alleged 'frustration' and 'attack' are not precipitators of violence but are the rationalizations men use after the fact of violence. Exclusive reliance on modes of inquiry that stress mechanistic thinking lessens the likelihood that male aggression involving women will be explored in the context of masculine identity and its connection to legal, political and economic privilege.

A fourth reason for not adding women to the existing laboratory paradigms has to do with the power of naming. There is a consciousness-raising process for women who try to understand instances of violence in

women's lives through research. Often I think it is marked by a point where the idea that knowledge exists 'for its own sake' is challenged. Research 'for women's sake' names the phenomenon 'male violence towards women' and begins to explore the experiences of violence in women's lives. Problematizing the phenomenon as 'the experimental analysis of interpersonal aggression' provides a gender neutrality that obscures women's experience. Finally, published work on violence from a feminist perspective intentionally links with direct efforts to seek change for potential and actual victims of violence. For example, research differentiating 'founded and unfounded' rape (Clark and Lewis 1977), identifying rape trauma syndrome (Burgess and Holmstrom 1974) and battered woman syndrome (Walker 1984) grounds its generalizations in the concrete lives of women speaking out against violence. It reflects the lives of women calling rape crisis phone lines, taking their first women's self-defence course and arriving at police stations, hospitals, shelters and offices of sexual harassment advisors. In this way, conceptual and empirical work have stayed connected such that they can be useful to women's emancipation from the belief that women are responsible for male violence.

Throughout the 1970s an analysis of rape from the victim's point of view was emerging as a competing theoretical framework to previous work. Several aspects of this emergent perspective illustrate the concept of generative theorizing. First, acts of rape were contextualized not as the generalized phenomenon of 'aggression' but as an aspect of close male-female relationships. Feminist research differentiated and acknowledged rape within different types of close relationships – date-rape and marital rape – where it had previously gone unacknowledged. Second, male power and dominance in society were given a central theoretical function, undermining the analysis of rape as primarily sexually motivated. This emphasis provided an understanding of the way in which sexual aggression or the threat of it is used to maintain male power and privilege at all levels – familial, legal and economic. Theorizing rape as an expression of male power has been generalized throughout the 1980s to other cultural variants including incest, wife-battering, sexual harassment and the proliferation of violent pornography. In turn, the study of these issues has generated a reinterpretation of phenomena previously construed exclusively in the context of female pathology, namely, running away from home, prostitution, multiple personality disorder and lesbianism.

Much has been found out about women's experience as victims of male violence through first-person accounts, interviews with and surveys of survivors of abuse. These data are accepted as valid scientific evidence and mark a substantial shift in scientific practice away from a laboratory paradigm in which manipulation and control of variables are central. The

shift in practice further underscores the connectedness of what is known with the methods for gathering knowledge. Detailed knowledge about women's experience cannot be separated from the narrative methods used to generate that knowledge any more than one can separate knowledge of subjects' button-pressing behaviour from the laboratory method used to generate it.

As women speak out about their experience with male violence, these acts of aggression are less often conceptualized as isolated acts of abnormality or as men's necessary response to provocation. Rather, an instance of aggression is located in a complex network of institutions – the family, the criminal justice system and the workplace. It is these larger social collectivities that give individual men licence to harm individual women with minimal consequences for doing so and it is in that framework that feminist theory as generative theory has the capacity to challenge the *status quo*. An analysis that began with research on rape has now been extended to link previously isolated phenomena such as wife-battering and incest, sexual harassment and sex discrimination. At a minimum, the framework of 'male violence towards women' has taken actions previously seen as psychologically deviant and placed them in the context of many social, political and economic interactions between men and women.

Though a feminist theory of male violence towards women has been extremely useful to those working for social change in women's lives, I often wonder whether the shift in perspective has much bearing on men's lives. Returning to the murders of the fourteen women in Montreal, Lee Lakeman documented her observations of men's reactions to women's expressions of rage and grief:

Some men are afraid for women; some warn us to keep quiet so as not to attack the rage of other men. Some send money to the shelter and others arrange a discussion group for men to work out their defensive responses. Many seem only to be seeking our approval; instead of asking themselves and each other what they can do to change, they are asking us to take care of them.

(Lakeman 1990: 22)

Harry Brod (1987) has talked about an ambivalence men might experience if feminist theory (and I would argue, real social change) requires men to examine their 'socialization towards violence'. Though violence against women continues, my impression is that there is a small but growing participation of men in the struggle against sexism and violence.⁴ In my community a year after the deaths of the Montreal women, a poster appeared that speaks to men's growing activism. The poster was produced by Brother Peace, a group of men working to end male violence and it is very much in keeping with an account of violence towards women as politically constituted. The text reads:

JUSTICE

WOMEN DESERVE NO LESS MEN DESERVE NO MORE

Women have the right to:

safety in the streets, safety in the home,
 reproductive choice
 be treated as equals, not objects
 economic independence
 challenge men without fear
 love other women

Men have the responsibility to:

take 'no' for an answer
 speak out against sexist behaviour
 support lesbian and gay rights
 share housework and the care of children
 reject pornography
 challenge men's anger towards feminists
 listen to women

In some ways this poster answers the question posed in Dave Naylor's editorial, namely, 'How can women be convinced Marc Lepine is not in any way representative of males?' The editorial writer called for trust and cooperation between men and women. Brother Peace announces itself as 'men breaking silence to end men's violence' and calls 'on all men to help stop the war against women'. The poster defines the basis of trust and cooperation by suggesting actions that connect social responsibility and social justice to masculinity and male power in our society. It does this for both the public and private spheres of men's and women's lives and in so doing calls for a reordering of social conduct.

The kind of theorizing feminists have struggled to develop over the past twenty-five years is finding its place in men's consciousness-raising groups and social activism efforts as well as in the academic community. Some years ago when I was reviewing research for a paper on the social psychology of rape (Cherry 1983) I discovered how little was written about the use of violence in men's lives compared to the growing body of work on women's experience of and resistance to victimization. While feminist research had extended its theoretical framework in ways I have already outlined, relative silence⁵ prevailed in our understanding of men's daily lives. Let me again use rape as an example. Kirkpatrick and Kanin's (1957) data in the 1950s revealed a substantial degree of victimization of American college-age women. Following women's reports of

sexual coercion with men known to them, Kanin (1969) also studied college-age men who reported an extensive use of coercion in their encounters with women. Several years elapsed before the phenomenon of date-rape was named and studied more extensively in the context of male sexual socialization and behavioural practices (Lottes 1988). In general, the study of men *qua* men has, for a long time, been missing in the analysis of violence towards women except for those few men incarcerated in prisons and mental institutions.

But there has been some movement. In 1975, the same year as Susan Brownmiller's publication of *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, an entire issue of the *Journal of Social Issues*, a periodical consistently devoted to social problems and social change, was concerned with the Vietnam war. Brownmiller analysed the extensiveness of rape in wartime, using the Vietnam War and the My Lai massacre of 16 March 1968 as one of the most horrific examples of wartime rape. While there was no direct discussion of wartime rape in the *Journal of Social Issues*, Eisenhart (1975) did acknowledge the link between masculinity, sexuality, and aggressivity:

The sexuality of Vietnam veterans was systematically assaulted and shaped in training ... a frustrated sexuality became linked with violence and aggression. One young veteran I have worked with became completely impotent three years after discharge. Unable to maintain an erection during the last three attempts at intercourse, he was afraid to try again. At this time he purchased a weapon, a pistol, and began brandishing and discharging it. His sexuality was blocked by a frustrated idealized male role which could not tolerate intimacy. The means to affirm manhood was through face-to-face combat, aggressive behavior, and the seeking of dominance.

(Eisenhart 1975: 21-2)

Eisenhart did not spell out the implications of combat training for such an individual's subsequent treatment of women. He wrote of the work he was doing with Vietnam veterans, and stated that 'many Vietnam veterans that I have worked with report sexual frustration, a fear of intimacy, and strong urges to "kill somebody"'. While Eisenhart did not pursue the implications in his article, in Brownmiller's writings we find evidence that women have been the legitimate targets for sexual assault in wartime and after.

The question of rape was omitted from the social psychological study of the Vietnam war and at a later date it was still only peripherally important to a social psychological examination of the male sex role. In an issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* devoted to the male experience, only one article by Alan Gross (1978) touched on violence towards women. There were no articles discussing issues of date-rape, wife-battering, incest or sexual

harassment as part of male experience. This is not surprising given that many of these phenomena were still in the process of being named by feminist researchers and explored predominantly from the vantage point of the female victims and/or survivors. However, by 1981, an entire issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* was devoted to the study of rape and while still focused primarily on the female victims of rape, one article by Neil Malamuth reviewed research to date bearing on how men assessed the likelihood that they would use rape under various conditions. For example, he asked men in a variety of studies to 'indicate their responses on a five point scale ranging from (1) not at all likely to (5) very likely', 'that they personally would rape if they could be assured of not being caught and punished' (Malamuth 1981: 140). I read this article with great interest in part because it built on earlier indications in the 1950s and 1960s that a relatively large percentage of men (20 per cent averaged across many studies scored above the mid-point on the question asked) would resort to coercion. It was clear that the phenomenon had not ceased, only the study of it.

It seems increasingly possible that our understanding of the particulars of everyday male experience with sexual coercion might now become part of the study of men's lives and the construction of masculinity from a male perspective. Malamuth has contributed by defining some of the parameters of 'rape proclivity' and linked it to nonsexual forms of aggression and men's interest in pornography. This might serve as a model for examining other types of violence towards women which have been conceptually linked by feminist analysis. How do men learn and use various forms of coercion and violence? Could we learn as much from qualitative work in this field as we have from qualitative work on female victimization? Coercive sexuality undoubtedly takes different forms in different men's lives and narrative techniques might provide a better sense of the particulars of men's lives. Moving away from the laboratory to study women's experience with victimization has shown us that we can accumulate an understanding well beyond laboratory findings.

Malamuth located 'rape proclivity' as an aspect of social learning theory and the processes of behavioural inhibition and disinhibition. Feminist theorizing and research suggest that rape proclivity is better located in the dual frameworks of gender roles and power/dominance relations. The latter perspective takes into account learned sex-roles but it goes further and requires an examination of how gender socialization combines with power - economic, legal and political - to affect the lives of men and women. Rape proclivity means something at both a psychological and societal level. A man who indicates that he is rape-prone is saying something about himself and how he might behave as well as something about his society and its tolerance of both the abuse of power and the abuse of women as legitimate targets.

There remains a relative silence about rape, wife-battering, incest, sexual harassment and sex discrimination from a male perspective. There are, however, the beginnings of a psychology of men and men's studies (for example, Brod 1987) in which a well-articulated account of violence in men's lives becomes possible. I think it is particularly pressing to examine the lives of men who have resisted the use of violent and coercive strategies and to examine the lives of men engaged alongside women in the struggle to end violence. How much do we know about how men arrived at these life choices? How much do we know about men who themselves have been victimized by sexual and physical assault?

When I began university teaching in 1974, many male undergraduates were interested in studying the problems of women, their fears of success and other afflictions. In the past few years, I have been encouraged that several men have shown more interest in studying male experience. They have wanted to study the men who batter their wives, the exploitation of black male sexuality in white pornography, the experience of expectant fathers, men's responses to feminism and more. The men who want to study what is wrong with women seem to have beaten a retreat, at least from my door. I taught my course on 'Social Problems' twice during the 1980s as 'The Male Gender Role' with an open and good natured response from the men who took the course either by mistake or expecting it to cover a range of social issues. I am not so certain this would be the response with the chillier campus climate of the 1990s.

However, as we read articles by and about men, theorizing about male violence towards women will change. For feminist researchers, the study of women has provided a much needed corrective to the caricatures of women found in the traditional research literature. Feminists have sometimes argued that the problems studied and the interpretations made in social psychology suffer from masculine bias when, in fact, much of social psychology is actually about 'subject populations' and 'general laws of social behaviour'. It cannot be automatically assumed that the mainstream literature tells us about men *qua* men any more than about women. Indeed, the masculine bias has been a universalizing and gender-neutralizing bias rather than a particularizing bias in social psychological theory construction.

Social psychological theorizing has developed within the framework of general psychology conceptualized as a predictive physical science. The discipline presents us with a literature about the general behaviour of the 'average person'. When we look further at who theorizes and does research, it is clearer that this universalizing habit is constructed through studies of particular subject groups and research practices that describe a standard of white, male and middle-class values and normative behaviours (Wallston and Grady 1985). Feminist theorists can run into the same

difficulties if we try to talk about 'women' in some generic or universal sense. At some point, we need to draw attention more clearly in all research to the limitations of our knowledge representations. We need to ask whose interests are served by the research we do? Who have we included and who have we excluded in our theoretical accounts? What steps have we taken to discuss the limitations of our theoretical framework?

I find myself constantly working between the conceptual poles of over-generalizing and over-particularizing. Just as soon as I have said something about 'women' I find it requires qualification and for this reason theorizing is a very tentative business intended for constant revising and rethinking. What troubles me in contemporary social psychology is that we have moved too far towards the pole of generalization at the expense of meaningful differences among people. The individual personality differences which often interest social psychologists are not the ones that historically figure so prominently in the daily lives of large numbers of people, namely, gender, race, class, age and sexual orientation.

In the study of interpersonal aggression, the experience of women victimized by male violence was at one time clouded by the language of 'subjects', 'independent' and 'dependent' variables. The laboratory methods of acquiring knowledge have sometimes obscured knowledge that women needed to have to survive. Feminist social theories bring words to women's experience so that women can make sense of their lives and the inequities in them. These words can reflect moments of powerful insight mobilizing us for social change. Social psychological theorizing has to be more than an intellectual puzzle for those outside the dominant culture in any way – as female, black, aboriginal, poor or elderly. For those in non-dominant and marginalized groups, theorizing is part of a larger struggle to be heard among ourselves and to change the dominant culture's economic and psychological impact on our lives. As we try to explain acts of violence, we empower ourselves to take action against violence. Feminist theorizing can become a powerful mode of resistance and a spur to reordering personal, social and institutional arrangements.