THE ABUSIVE COUPLE:

A SYMBIOTIC BOND ENABLING THE EXPRESSION OF FORMATIVE BEHAVIORAL SCRIPTS

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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

The aim of this paper is to explore the interpersonal dynamics of abusive couples[1], by analyzing the evolution process of such relationships. The term *abusive* is meant to embrace a broad range of behavior, from mental cruelty, to outright physical violence, with the underlying principle being that the will of one partner is imposed on the other, without respect for their rights, without their consent, and resulting in some form of pain, injury, or fear. The chosen conceptualization includes both *instrumental* and *expressive* acts of violence (Gelles & Straus, cited in Farrington, 1986; Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg & Walker, 1990). Instrumental violence is understood to be a conscious strategy of intimidation, dominance, or social control; it is a deliberate and chosen act, reflective of the abuser's attempt to control a given situation, or gain power. On the other hand, expressive violence is understood to be an impulsive reaction to a situation, reflective of a loss of control, or a regression to a weaker, less powerful state.

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[1]The research literature refers to the *dynamics of abusive couples* in many ways: volatile attachments, family violence, domestic violence, spouse abuse, spouse assault, wife abuse, wife battering, marital violence, courtship violence, etc. Usually, either gender or marital status is attached to the terms used. Since the aim of this paper is to take a broad perspective, and not define or limit these characteristics at the onset, the more generic term was chosen. However, the other terms will be used further on.

A *systemic* approach will be taken to uncovering possible underlying forces which shape the progressive stages of abusive relationships. For the purpose at hand, these stages are conceptualized as acts within the unfolding of a drama, and will be addressed sequentially, from that perspective. In keeping with the chosen structural frame, the partners will be looked upon as actors in the drama, the search for love and acceptance as the *controlling idea*[2] or theme of the story, and the domestic context as the setting or stage. Many of the most widely cited theories of family violence will be woven into the narrative. However, since the goal is to shed light on what is acknowledged as being a highly complex phenomenon, the position taken is that no one theoretical perspective can fully explain it. Only a multidimensional perspective can approximate the beginnings of a causal understanding.

STRUCTURAL FRAME

A SYSTEMIC PROCESS-ORIENTED APPROACH

Assuming that both partners in an abusive relationship were hoping for the best when they made their commitment to one another, once the destructive patterns emerge,

[2]The term *controlling idea* is used by writers of feature film scripts and plays (McKee, 1989) when referring to the theme of the story as embodied in action. This theme is the motivating force (conscious or unconscious) which can help explain the progressive choice of actions made by the protagonist.

regardless of whether one takes the perspective of the one who abuses, or the one who is abused, both will surely realize that their situation is hardly the fulfillment of idealistic hopes. They may blame themselves for this unfortunate turn of events, or each other. However, regardless of where blame is placed, since by definition a relationship is interactive, both partners contributed jointly to the quality of the resulting interpersonal dynamic. Therefore, in trying to understand the mechanisms behind the emergence of abusive patterns of behavior, placing blame may be counter-productive.

Typically, the actors in abusive relationships play discernible roles, at least in terms of physical actions - one is the batterer, the other is battered. Although there have been a few studies where reciprocally violent partners are found (Post, Willett, Franks, House & Back, 1981), since these are relatively rare in the literature, the former assignment of action roles will be the focus. However, since the goal is to have a more compassionate understanding of the interpersonal dynamics of the couple as a whole, and not interpret the role of abuser as villainous, while that of the abused, by default, verging on heroic (particularly if they transcend their situation), it is necessary to go beyond a reductionistic view which only attempts to cast partners into such judgment laden victim/victimizer positions. In order to heal the abusive couple and eliminate patterns of violent interaction from

their behavioral repertoire, one should take a more systemic approach which examines the problem from a relationship level as well as from the individual participating-actor level. Despite the large body of literature on marital violence, relatively few studies have taken such an approach.

"Looking at relationship violence as involving a minimum of two individuals, system theorists view violence as a system product rather than the result of individual pathology (Lehr & Fitzsimmons, 1991, p. 259). A systemic approach to spousal violence tries to accommodate the perspectives of both partners simultaneously, looking at the situation from a *both-and* position, rather than an *either/or* position, which would tend to either blame the victim, or construct a villain (Goldner et al., 1990).

Trying to discern the patterns of behavior which emerge as part of the interpersonal dynamics of the couple as a system, "... shifts the focus from a consideration of the isolated behaviors of individuals to a consideration of interaction" (Giles-Sims, cited in Lehr & Fitzsimmons, 1991, p. 256). The aim is to understand the *process* of interaction as well as the effects of different system characteristics on that process. Hotaling and Sugarman (1986) assert that any study of husband to wife violence which does not include data from both partners in the couple, or does not address the interactive processes and behavior of the couples, has methodological flaws, which

aside from hindering the advance of theoretical understanding of the phenomenon, tend to confuse the issue.

It may be necessary to adopt an even broader definition of what is meant by system, and move beyond the frame of the couple within the domestic context, to integrate an analysis of the relationship of that context itself to the larger sociocultural environment. Much of the research which studies the problem of family violence, since it subdivides it and focuses on one domain at a time, may in fact be fundamentally misleading for practitioners and researchers alike, in that by not taking the entire context into consideration, it does not allow for an integrated view of a highly complex phenomenon (Edelson, Eisikovits, Guttmann & Sela-Amit, 1991). An *ecological* perspective would allow for such an integrated view in that it ...

> ... deals with the interrelationships between organisms and their environments. As such, its models ... [address] the complexities of environmental impacts ... [and] subject matter in which there are chains of effects.... [There is an understanding that] present conditions not only are sustained by complex networks of processes and interactions and dependencies but also are related to prior circumstances, not only in simple lines of cause and effect but also in degree of restriction both of freedom and in the setting of boundaries for options and choices. (Withey, 1980, p. 10)

The broad systemic approach adopted for this paper, ecological in some respects, will be used to examine a series of factors at once: (1) the individual cognitive, psychosocial and attitudinal characteristics of both actors

in the domestic drama and the intricacies of their joint dynamic; (2) the formative experiences of both individuals and how the behavioral models they were exposed to in childhood are brought into play on the domestic stage; and finally (3) the sociocultural context which can further contribute to the emergence of abusive behaviors in couples.

DRAMATIC STORY FORM

Structure

A co-joint form of treatment for abusive couples advocated by Goldner et al. (1990) recommends that each spouse tells the story of the relationship in a sequential manner, from the beginning. Perhaps it is only by starting at the source that one can begin to understand how an abusive couple arrived at its present, dysfunctional mode of interaction. *Dramatic structure* is the chosen framework for the temporal, process-oriented aspect of the analytical approach taken.

From its foundation in Ancient Greece, the western definition of dramatic structure has evolved to mean a three act formula within which stories unfold (McKee, 1989). Each *act* is a unit or block of dramatic action, which has its own beginning, middle, and end. Each of the

three acts fulfills a certain function in driving the story (Field, 1984).

Act I exists in order to *set up* the story, introduce the main characters, state the dramatic premise, and establish the situation. It ends with a significant *plot point*, which is meant to hook the action and spin it in a new direction. In the story to be explored, Act I will trace the relationship from the initial attraction, through courtship, to the decision to live together. The setting up of a home is defined as the decisive plot point which spins the action into Act II.

Act II contains the bulk of the story, where the principal themes emerge and are explored. It revolves around *confrontation* - between the reaching for a goal on the part of the protagonist(s), and obstacles towards that goal. The goal is referred to as the controlling idea or *driving need*. Act II ends with a significant plot point as well. For the purpose of this discussion, this would be the time when one spouse would leave the other as a result of marital violence. Act III constitutes the *resolution* to the story. In this case, one must explore several alternative endings which differ along two dimensions: (1) the decision whether to break the bond or persevere knowing the (possibly escalating) risks; and (2) the decision to seek counselling or not. If the bond is broken, the challenge becomes avoiding unconsciously seeking the same drama in the next relationship, thereby continuing the

cycle of violence. The dramatic story structure is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *The progression of the three acts in drama.*

Act I	**Act II**	**Act III**
setup	confrontation	resolution

Text and Subtext

Before proceeding, one final element fundamental to drama must be introduced, namely, the contradiction between *text* and *subtext* (McKee, 1989). This notion is usually applied on several levels, for instance: (1) character definition - taking Shakespeare's Macbeth as an example, the inherent conflict between ambition and conscience is what adds dimension and depth to his character; (2) dialogue - what is said (the text) is often hardly what is meant (the subtext); and (3) the structure of the narrative itself - the controlling idea may actually be superficial in terms of driving the story, in fact, it is often a counter-idea, a contradiction, even negation of sorts, that controls outcome. However, the protagonist may be the last to be aware of their unconscious motives. This concept of contradiction will be woven into the narrative of this paper.

THE UNFOLDING DRAMA

ACT I: THE SETUP

THE ACTORS

Although both men and women admit to being violent towards their spouse partner (Blackwell, 1992), the typical profile of the abusive couple is one where the man is the perpetrator and the woman the victim. "Spouse abuse consists mainly of *wife* battering ... [and there is] little support for the existence of the *battered husband syndrome*." (Post et al., 1981, p. 164). This contention can be corroborated by consulting various sources, for instance: (1) the majority of counselling centers for domestic violence identify men as the aggressors and women as the victims (Lundberg, 1990); (2) the marital violence research literature typically ascribes violent behavior to the male and victim status to the female; (3) Canadian government funding for family-violence related research, which is on the rise, clearly acknowledges women (and children) as the victims of such violence (Adolph, 1992); and finally (4) on a more informal note, a random two-day consecutive sampling of news items from the *Montreal Gazette*, revealed four stories pertaining to family violence - women were the victims in all cases (Flynn, 1992; Noel, 1992a, 1992b; Schwartz, 1992b). Therefore,

rather than looking for isolated cases of victimization of men by women, the typical gender-based roles of victim and perpetrator will be assumed.[3] However, as previously stated, these roles are only defined in terms of action choices, not in terms of attributing hero or villain status, or judging one as necessarily *good* and the other as *bad*.

THE CONTROLLING IDEA

Couples do not bond with the express intent of inflicting pain on one another. On the contrary, often the noblest of goals is the driving force behind the decision to commit to one another. The motivation may be to start a family, to settle down and create a home, or simply to join forces and share the trials and tribulations of life as a unit. The assumption, or at least the hope, of each partner may be that the relationship will bring them comforts such as love, security, support, trust, and acceptance.

Before proceeding further, it must be acknowledged that due to circumstances, or culture, some men and women may not be allowed to freely formulate and express such idealistic goals in making marital commitments. For

[3]It is probable that violence against husbands by wives has a different purpose or meaning, possibly even being a defensive reaction to abuse by the husband. Therefore, even if it were more common, it would not be practicable to equate *husband abuse* and *wife abuse*. Furthermore, although there are significant health risks associated with being a victim of interpersonal violence, many of these contributing to the erosion of a sense of personhood (French, 1992), the threat to the self resulting from being a victim of violence at the hands of a spouse or partner is much greater for women than for men (Mills, 1984).

instance, some marital partnerships are formed due to social pressure, not as a result of genuine desire (e.g., due to pregnancy). In some circumstances, marriage may provide the best alternative out of a negative situation (e.g., parental abuse at home, or poverty). Within certain cultural groups, marriage is an economic partnership between families of origin, rather than the free expression of pursuit of individual goals by the spouses. Or, if one were to take a feminist perspective, all marriages represent a sanctioned means of perpetuating patriarchal social structures, rendering women and children the possessions of men (Avni, 1991; Brownmiller, 1977). In this case, the question might be ... "What's love got to do with it?"

Having acknowledged that the freedom to pursue heartfelt ideals is not universal, and, in fact, may not even be considered as a possible alternative to the status quo in some cases, the position taken is that if it *were* possible, the controlling idea underlying the formation of many marriages (formal or common law), would be the search for a love-match[4]. It is further assumed that the envisioned result of such a love-match, would be the creation of a

[4]Anthropologists are currently coming to grips with the idea that the concept of *romantic love*, with its possible outcome, the love-match, may be more of a universal cross-cultural concept than previously thought (Goleman, 1992). Anthropologist William Jankowiak (cited in Goleman, 1992) suggests that as traditional rules for marriage are weakening in many cultures, the trend towards *love marriages* may be on the rise. Regardless of being viewed as highly impractical by older generations, even dangerous, it is an attractive option for many.

Home Sweet Home[5].

In exploring the potential benefits of being able to create the ideal home, one could assert that this in itself is not the final goal. The real desire might be for something possibly not formulated as a conscious motive, that being, the opportunity for growth, or *self-actualization*. Humanistic psychologists, such as Maslow and Rogers, assert that the need for self-actualization is the highest of human motives (Atkinson, Atkinson & Hilgard, 1983).

Maslow (1954) classified basic human motives into a hierarchy of needs. Figure 2 offers a graphic representation of this hierarchical arrangement. He maintained that until lower level needs such as survival and safety are satisfied, the higher level needs cannot come into control; the former are sometimes referred to as deficiency needs, which one must be rid of, while the latter represent pleasure of growth aspirations. The notion of Home Sweet Home fits well within Maslow's hierarchical framework, representing a safe nourishing environment which could adequately fulfill lower level needs. Only the attainment of such a base can enable an inhabitant to embark on their personal journey of self discovery and fulfillment of individual potential.

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[5]The concept of *Home Sweet Home* is defined as meaning that place where one feels most comfortable, accepted, and happy. It refers to an ideal, or fantasy situation, and thus does not necessarily mean a recreation of the parental family home of origin. In that sense, finding *home* may refer to finding an idealized family that one never had in childhood.

Figure 2. *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

Source: Atkinson et al. (1983, p. 318).

INITIAL ATTRACTION

"In the beginning, there was magic ..."

From the records of abusive couples in joint therapy, Goldner et al. (1990) present a fascinating picture of how their relationships began. "Each partner believed that they had found a perfect match, and together, they formed a complementary, reparative bond premised on the fantasy of a yin/yang 'fit' between them" (p. 360). Lost in the throws of romantic love (surrendering to the pull of the previously defined controlling idea perhaps?), the men and women are blind to facts about each other - willingly so. In part, the power of the attraction seems to originate in the idea of finding an ally. The lover becomes someone who shares in the fight against the world at large - or perhaps more importantly, against the family of origin.

Initially, the love is like a magical rescue from familiar and painful loyalty binds. Both feel uplifted, *saved*. It seems as if, for the first time, they can truly be themselves without fear of judgment. They feel accepted, loved, and respected. In fact, each may believe that they can finally transcend the all too familiar limitations and insecurities which have *cursed* them in the past. There may even be evidence of this transcendence. If so, a profound attachment to the partner will start to grow. But eventually, inexplicably, the magic of this "illusory

escape fantasy" (Goldner et al., 1990, p. 360) wears thin. And then, shock of shocks, as violent behavior emerges, a new reality is born, in total contrast and opposition to the initial dream.

There is evidence that for a substantial number of abusive couples, patterns of violent interaction surfaced far before the making of a lasting commitment. The study of what is now called *courtship violence* is relatively new (Makepeace, 1987). The emerging picture is one which suggests that "the occurrence of violence during courtship may be widespread and serve as a training ground for later domestic violence" (Roscoe & Benaske, 1985, p. 419). However, since "violence ... [is] more apt to occur if the relationship ... [has] achieved a state of seriousness or intimacy than if partners ... [are] still at a casual dating stage" (Roscoe & Benaske, 1985, p. 423), it is possible that it only emerges once the partners feel safe with each other, or trust that the emotional dependence which has been established will assure the relationship survives. In fact, many abusive dating couples do remain together or marry (estimates vary between 30 and 53%).

In some cultural settings, backing out of the relationship may not be possible, despite the evident dangers of remaining - in the Middle East, for instance, where patriarchal codes reign and keep women in subjugation (Avni, 1991). However, in the situations where termination of the link is possible, where cultural or economic

imperatives are not imposed, why does the relationship survive in so many cases? Or more importantly, why does the tendency to violent interaction survive; even if the relationship dissolves, there is evidence of a possible spill-over effect onto future links, which also turn out to be abusive (Makepeace, 1987).

And so, the man and woman, each having found an ally against the world in the other, decide to *play house*. What initial violence has been experienced is dismissed. Why should they give up on someone who finally allows their *true self* to emerge, and be accepted without judgement? Maybe the partner does have a few flaws, but let's not dwell on that. Let's think about that tomorrow, or better yet, let's *not* think about it ... let's plunge deeper ...

ACT II: CONFRONTATION

Despite the potential idealism of the controlling idea motivating men and women to marry or live together, judging by the fact that up to 60% of couples will experience domestic violence as part of their union (French, 1992; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981), it is clear that many do not find their fantasy, happy home. On the contrary, what they do find, is a nightmare. The *anti-home* they create, rather than offering safety from danger, becomes a source of danger. The interaction between spouses degenerates further as the enactment of destructive and desperate patterns of

expression is *perfected* with each performance. As the couple spirals further and further away from their dream, one might ask ... "How did they end up in this situation? Why did the dream turn sour?" But first, let's establish the setting, or *light* the stage if you will.

THE DOMESTIC STAGE

Case

HE
You know I'd never hurt you ...

SHE
I know that ...

The Scene:

His hands clutch her throat. *This is a new scene for the couple, never played before.* It is real, yet there is a tentative feeling to the action. Both are not sure what will happen next. As his grip tightens, simultaneously, the couple notices that they stand in the window, in full view of the street. This realization telegraphs an instant message - "We are on a stage". For a split second, they catch each other's eye. He breaks the hold. Soon after, without overtly acknowledging what just occurred, they leave the house together. Judging by their behavior, it is as if none of it happened. The only clue is that they both rush to get off the stage; by leaving home they do.

Days later, the couple reconstructs the scene. They acknowledge the artificial feeling to the drama. They comment on each other's performance - like actors talking shop. Although by re-telling and sharing in the drama they convince each other they are *close*, each is very much alone, not divulging their true feelings about the experience. (Anonymous, 1992)

Analysis:

This case illustrates two conflicts underlying many abusive scenarios:

1) There is a tangible feeling of unreality. Or would *surrealism* be more precise, as in derived from the unconscious? Simultaneously, there is a feeling of being hyper-aware of the situation, of being *so* conscious that it feels staged and fake.

2) Afterwards, there is a feeling of real intimacy between the couple; as if by having shared something terrible, their bond is strengthened. But at another level, there is a feeling of extreme alienation and loneliness; both realize that neither truly *knows* or trusts the other, but both are too afraid to tell.

	HE
Text:	You know I'd never hurt you ...
Subtext:	*Please don't leave me ...*

	SHE
Text:	I know that ...
Subtext:	*I won't leave you if you won't leave me ...*

With the moving into the domestic setting, the stage is finally set. On it, the man and woman find themselves, for better or worse, living the roles of their parents, those of husband and wife. But woven into the mundane domestic experience, are these bizarre outbursts which are usually not discussed; because they are ignored, they linger, at the back of everyone's mind. Furthermore, since "the notion of the home as an especially private place is shared and acknowledged by other social institutions" (Witt, 1987, p. 293), whatever happens on this stage usually remains private; it is not discussed in or outside

the home.

Men and women seem *universally* conditioned not to break the seal of silence surrounding family life. To do so would represent betrayal and breach of trust. However, in the case of the woman, who may now face physical danger, the ramifications of secrecy can become life-threatening. Having already failed in finding a safe home, trapped in silence, the abused woman further reduces her chances of finding somewhere to escape to, should she finally decide to go. For the violent man, too, the domestic stage is a trap. The self image that the home as mirror now reflects, is far from the realization of his dreams. To escape the home would hardly guarantee escape from this image, now etched in memory.

And so, the abusive drama is played out on a private, secluded stage, with only the participants (or their children) as audience. In this vacuum, without social intervention from outside the immediate family circle, the patterns of violence escalate. And, in fact, the secrecy may function as oxygen, feeding the destructive fires. The binding power of *the secret* is one explanation. Social isolation is another.[6] Studies which assess the impact of

[6]For immigrant women in Canada, who are only recently beginning to break the code of silence about spousal abuse, the problem is in part being attributed to isolation from a supportive community (Schwartz, 1992a). To take the case of Sri Lanka, wife abuse there is unheard of. The community acts as watchdog. "Men live with their wives' families, members of the extended family are everywhere and everyone minds everyone else's business" (Schwartz, 1992a, p. F1). In Canada, there are few supportive witnesses.

social isolation on husband-to-wife violence have confirmed the potency of this variable (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). So let us now consider the drama; what *scenes* are played on this secret stage, why, and by what types of individuals?

THE SCENES

The first thing to consider, perhaps, is: Are these violent scenes *original creations* (improvisations based on current experience if you will), or are they *re-creations* of some sort (based on previously written material). Evidence seems to point to previous ownership of the scripts, to which the actors have an innate copyright. However, taking into consideration the damaging nature of the scripts, why would anyone want to perform them?

Although wife abuse has not always been considered a crime (Davidovich, 1990; French, 1992), increasingly, legal and social opinion is moving towards an assessment of abusive interpersonal behavior between lovers as criminal, and dysfunctional.[7] Is it possible though, that for some abusive couples, the initial contact with dysfunctional modes of interpersonal behavior, despite trends in legal and social opinion, rather than being a deterrent, becomes part of the attraction? In order to explore this idea

[7]Even in Middle Eastern countries, where Islamic culture condones violence against women by men, change in the direction of legally limiting the severity of such violence is being instituted, rendering *excessive* abuse illegal (Davidovich, 1990).

further, one should first define what is meant by *dysfunctional*. Norwood (1985) describes the dysfunctional family as one ...

> ... in which members play rigid roles and in which communication is severely restricted to statements that fit those roles. Members are not free to express a full range of experiences, wants, needs, and feelings, but rather must limit themselves to playing that part which accommodates those played by other family members. Roles operate in all families, but as circumstances change, the members must also change and adapt in order for the family to continue to be healthy.... In dysfunctional families, major aspects of reality are denied, and roles remain rigid. (p. 6)

So what is it that could become attractive about such a limiting, rigid, and individually unfulfilling situation? Perhaps it is the *recognition* of familiar scenarios, either witnessed or experienced during childhood, which holds the key. Perhaps the opportunity for restaging the *formative family drama* is particularly alluring, even *functional* from the perspective of the partners involved. The function being, that in recognizing behavior patterns which emerge as part of the interpersonal dynamic with the partner, a sense of *trust* is born - trust not rooted in common sense, or reason, but rooted in the predictability of the behavior. The sheer *familiarity* is comforting and alludes to having found home. Hence, the paradox, on the one hand, there is the need to escape from past pain, while on the other, there is the inability to resist the *trustworthiness* of situations which repeat past pain.

This explanation of the learning and perpetuating of family violence is rooted in *social learning theory* (Bandura, 1973), which simply stated, contends that exposure to violence during childhood can predispose a person to future experience of such behavior. It "provides a role model and specific script for future violent action" (Post et al., 1983, p. 165).

One can break childhood exposure to violence down into an even finer multifaceted definition, moving beyond the framework of learning by observation alone. Three further distinctions have been defined in the literature: *observing* violence; *being a victim* of violence; and *committing* violence (Owens & Strauss, cited in Post et al., 1983; Rouse, 1984). This differentiation may be predictive of which role will be played in the future, that of victim or abuser. Evidence points in the direction that early victimization by parents predisposes one to continue being the victim at the hands of a spouse. Being an instigator of aggression in childhood tends to pave the way for resorting to the use of force in resolving future conflicts in a variety of situations, not necessarily restricted to domestic ones; however, as a predictor, it is not as stable in that it is contingent on punishment received for such childhood acts. Mere observation of violence emerges as the most influential type of early exposure in that it tends to "generate a psychological identification with and/or modeling of one's own behavior after the aggressor (Post et

al., p. 138).

A further theoretical explanation of how violent behavior patterns are learned, which takes into account both observational and experiential exposure, is called the *intergenerational transmission model* (Kalmuss, cited in Shields, McCall & Hanneke, 1988). For instance, an "... assaulted parent may displace hostile feelings by abusing ...[their] child" (Poteat, Grossnickle, Cope & Wynne, 1990, p. 833), the child in turn, learns roles for the future. Overall, Hotaling and Sugarman (1986) indicate that "the experience of violence as a child or adolescent is very close to meeting the criteria as a *consistent* [italics added] risk marker ..."(p.106) for future domestic violence. The role of formative experiences as a risk for domestic violence both for the perpetrator and the victim is substantial.

Formative experience is often referred to in the family violence literature as a retained *script*, or alternatively, as: a *reservoir of response capabilities* (Farrington, 1986); the *behavioral and social repertoire* (Davidovich, 1990); or a *learned response* (Lundberg, 1990). These terms hint at a novel way of approaching the problem, namely, using *script models*. Withey (1980) cites two sources for the application of this theoretical model: Abelson (1976) and his analysis of *cognitive scripts*; and Goffman (1974) and his notion of *frame analysis*. Although Withey proposes script models in reference to an analysis

of learning from television, the approach could conceivably be pertinent for an analysis of learning from childhood experience as well. From such a perspective, formative experience would be seen to be *scripted* and *framed* within the family setting. A review of the literature indicates that this approach has not been explicitly applied to the study of family violence. In view of the adopted dramatic framework, it is worth exploring.

Abelson's theoretical position on social cognition has its roots in cognitive psychology, as well as studies of information and cognitive processing. The fundamental building block of his position is the notion of *cognitive script*, or "... coherent sequence of events expected by the individual, involving him either as a participant or as an observer" (Abelson, 1976, p. 33). Scripts are considered to be constructed from a chain of *vignettes*, which are defined as encoded events of short duration, selected and retained from experience. They link not only visual image, but an affiliated *caption* as well (associated affect for instance). These scripts can either be *episodic* (simple temporal links), *categorical* (related to types of situations), or *hypothetical* (for planning future action).

Abelson contends that "cognitively mediated social behavior depends on the joint occurrence of two processes: (a) the selection of a particular script to represent the given social situation; and (b) the taking of a participant role within that script" (Abelson, 1976, p.42-43). The

interesting aspect of this notion is that although a lot of experience observing the enactment of scripts which are not participated in is accumulated during childhood, many may never actually be participated in during a lifetime. The right opportunity to jump in and participate must occur. According to Abelson, there are certain *gating features* which must be favorable in order for the *virginity problem* to be overcome. And then, with the first performance, or experience of the self as participant in the event, a process of expansion of the script is initiated.

Introducing Goffman into the discussion at this point will not only take into account the idea of *scripted sequence of events*, but *setting within time and space* as well. Could not the moving into a joint domestic setting by a couple act as a potent *gating mechanism*, whereby the opportunity to finally take part in the play is offered? According to Goffman (1974) ...

> ... a *drama* [italics added] frames and structures an aspect of life by creating a portrayal that is a way of looking at a piece of the world. The flow of events in everyday life is often hard to interpret and difficult to understand. The dramatist selects what is significant, what creates the plot, and what provides a sense of outcome or resolution. (Withey, 1980, p.13)

Although Goffman makes a distinction between *formally framed experience* (created works such as films and shows) and *face-to-face interaction*, it is interesting to consider that from the point of view of a child witnessing battling parents, paralyzed by fear and typically powerless in terms of influencing the action, the event might just as well be

a drama on a stage (except that it is surely more threatening, dangerous, and painful to witness). From this perspective, the child is the *dramatist*, attributing meaning while interpreting the drama. In trying to make sense of the events, the viewer organizes the *strips* (arbitrary slices or cuts from the stream of ongoing activity), *framing* them into a meaningful, interconnected whole where both the actions of the actors (the parents), as well as the stage itself (the domestic setting) are integrated and powerfully linked.

The recognition of patterns of behavior from childhood can have on profound effect on the interpersonal behavioral dynamics of abusive couples. However, providing actual action scripts to follow is only one dimension. Another possibility is the provision of opportunities to relive and respond to past pain which may not have been possible during childhood. Lundberg (1990) suggests that treatment programs for abusive couples must address the *psychodynamics*[8] of the couple's interaction process, particularly, the possible *parataxic distortion* (Arieti, 1967) which may be part of it. Parataxic distortion operates when an individual reacts to a present situation " ... *as if* they were reliving the situation in terms of an

[8]Psychodynamics, as defined in Webster Universal Dictionary, is the clinical examination of an individual's personality in relation to past and present experiences as they associate to motivation.

earlier experience" (Lundberg, 1990, p. 245)[9]. Lundberg (1990) asserts that these distortions "operate to an extreme degree in relationships in which there is an intense level of rage that erupts into physical violence (p. 245).

Case

The Scene:

He married a newly divorced woman with two young children because he wanted to "make a better life for her". The violent episodes occur when he believes she is too involved with her children and is ignoring him.

Analysis:

His own lack of proper childhood nurturance creates an intense neediness within him. He reacts to his wife *as if* she were (or should be) the good mother he never had; he becomes enraged and physically attacking when he is denied. (Lundberg, 1990, p. 246)

In the case described, there is an apparent recognition on the part of the husband when interacting with his wife, of a familiar interpersonal dynamic. However, instead of repeating a past action, he is expressing an emotion he *would have liked to express* during childhood, but was unable to. Thus, he is only now overtly performing what was covertly played in the past. For abusive men, the abusive father as role model is one influence. Unexpressed reactions to negative experience

[9]The notion of *as if performances* and the definition of three modes of experience (*protaxic, parataxic,* and *syntaxic*), derive from the work of psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, and are discussed in his book The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry (1953).

with the mother is another possible influence. However, regardless of the source (past or present), the possible outcome of performing the first violent act needs to be addressed.

The notion of scripts can be applied not only to the case of recalling and reliving past experience, but also to the perfecting of current performance of freshly written scripts. The domestic violence literature reveals that there may be a spiralling effect once violent interaction patterns are initiated in a relationship. The partners will explore their roles and behaviors further and further. The question is, where will it lead? Will a plateau level of abuse or violence be reached, which both negotiate in some way, or will the exploration lead to escalating levels of violence?

This leads us a discussion of what has been called the *the cycle of violence theory* (Walker, 1979, 1984, cited in Shields et al., 1988; 1991). This theory is rooted in the social learning model as well, and presents the concept of spousal abuse as cyclical. To a large extent, the violence is predictable, and since it is recurring, although the process may be gradual, its intensity is typically amplified with each consecutive *run*[10]. Therefore, the violent scripts will evolve with each performance.

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[10]The cycle of violence theory has increasing credibility within the Judicial system. A training video (Confidential Source, 1992) designed to prepare Canadian judges for ruling in family-violence cases, presented it at length.

PSYCHODYNAMICS OF THE ACTORS

Having analyzed aspects of the stage and the scenes played on it, the next step is to better understand the actors, particularly, the psychodynamics of their interaction patterns. Lenore Walker's cycle of violence theory is one way of illuminating aspects of the abusive interaction process. Young and Gerson (1991) present the following overview[11]:

> The cycle [of violence] consists of three phases: the tension building phase; the acute battering incident, and the calm, loving respite. The tension-building phase consists of minor battering incidents and a general building up of tension in the relationship. The battered woman denies to herself that she is angry for being psychologically and/or physically abused, and rationalizes that perhaps she deserves the abuse. She tends to minimize minor battering incidents and attempts to control external factors that might upset the delicate balance of the relationship. Tension increases as the battered woman's anger begins to become more apparent, and she withdraws more from her batterer.
>
> In the second phase - the acute battering incident - there is an uncontrollable discharge of the tension that has built up during phase one. ... The battered woman occasionally provokes a phase two battering incident. This may be in response to her fear, anxiety, or anger about being battered previously, and/or the need to have some control over when and why the incident occurs.
>
> The third phase of the cycle consists of loving, kind, and contrite behavior by the batterer. ... Women battered in phase two feel lonely, angry, frightened, and hurt, but can change to being happy, confident, and loving in phase three. During the third phase the woman sees her partner as strong, dependable, and

[11]The cycle of violence theory is described in detail in Lenore Walker's book The Battered Woman (1979).

> loving. Consequently, battered woman often feel guilty if they break off the relationship. (p. 33)

On first appraisal, this behavior appears masochistic, or reflective of finding pleasure in pain. Masochism has been studied extensively, both in the clinical and theoretical psychoanalytic literature, as a means to explain why people stay in injurious relationships. Traditionally, there have been negative connotations associated with it. Masochism, as it relates to spouse abuse, implies that since women often stay and continue to be abused for extended periods of time, they must derive some sort of pleasure (often linked to sexual pleasure) in being beaten by the men they love. However, Young and Gerson (1991) suggest that there have been significant advances in contemporary psychoanalytic theory which are relevant to masochism[12], and which should be integrated in order to allow for a more balanced, as well as *feminist*, understanding of this type of behavior. They stress the importance of integrating *object-relations* and *attachment theory* - both of which focus on early childhood interactions with parents - as a means of developing a theory of *relational masochism.* They provide the following psychoanalytic perspective on why women remain in abusive relationships:

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[12]Among these, attachment theory, separation-individuation, object-relations, and self-psychology were named. Many of these perspectives focus on analysis of early childhood interactions with parents as a means of clarifying adult behavior.

> In the battering relationship the woman often finds herself in a hostile, yet not unfamiliar world. Moreover, we maintain that aspects of early trauma are represented in character structure, and that the battered woman's conscious and unconscious working models of attachment, developed in early childhood, provide the foundation of adult emotional relationships. .... Battered women do *not* seek pleasure in pain, but rather are predisposed to endure pain as the requisite for an attachment relationship.

The development of the somewhat *faulty* conscious and unconscious working models of attachment mentioned, are explained by *traumatic bonding theory* (Dutton & Painter, 1981). Simply stated, this perspective states that an infant's attachment to its primary caregiver (usually the mother) is traumatized, in that faced with a power imbalance, and intermittent abuse from the caregiver, the infant will make increased attempts to gain proximity to the attachment figure. Thus, the belief that one must accept pain and suffering in order to remain in the proximity of the *loved one* is born. Also implied, is the need to please, or try to control abuse if possible. This is done by substituting own needs, for those of the attachment figure, and then trying to appease theirs. Perhaps the only need which is retained, is the need to *need*.

In analyzing the cycle of violence from a traumatic bonding perspective, certain expected behavioral patterns emerge, for instance:

(1) Attempted control over the love object. The effort to gain some control, no matter how limited, over what is

a passively experienced danger.

(2) Defensive operations, such as denial, identification, and projection:

a) Denial of the partner's hatefulness helps protect the abused from possible love-object loss;

b) Identification with the abusive partner, in order to understand them, allows some control over them;

c) Projection of their own hostility (which is denied) onto the abusive partner, results in a provocative style of relating. Furthermore, the abused will project their own needs and wants onto others. They will give to others what they want to receive, often becoming inexhaustibly giving (which indicates just how needy and insatiable they feel).

(3) Low self-esteem and depressive affect, which often result in the inability to enjoy positive achievement, and the feeling of guilt over it, which the abuser will use to their advantage.

If one were to take a feminist perspective in analyzing many of the personality characteristics of abused women, one could say that they are a result of being conditioned to live within the confines of patriarchal institutions, such as marriage. Such qualities as putting one's own needs aside, maintaining the relationship at all costs, catering to the needs of others without limit or question, are all part of the traditional *wife syndrome*. Goldner et al. (1990) argue that by the fact that a woman's

identity is forged within a feminine relational context (part of the mother's psychological space, which she will never leave), she will automatically have an empathic orientation, as well as difficulties separating herself from relationships.

However, before addressing the issue of gender politics in the home, let us shift our gaze, lest we forget the other actor on this stage. But first, to finish off the discussion about the personality of those who play the abused in the domestic drama, one should just add that not all abused women would fall into the mold just described. Studies which have assessed personality characteristics and attitudes of abused women give evidence that there is no *one* type of abused woman (Follingstad, Laughlin, Polek, Rutledge & Hause, 1991). Not all play the passive, masochistic, self-sacrificing role in the family. Many abused women do not define themselves as helpless, but rather perceive themselves as fairly assertive, as well as non-traditional. Many hope the man will change - and stay for that reason. Follingstad et al. (1991) found the women to differ along many dimensions, such as: abuse history as a child, reasons for staying in the relationship; beliefs; levels of assertiveness; willingness to use resources to help themselves; levels of emotional abuse experienced; and ability to predict violence.

With a view to understanding the male abuser, we may need to look deeper and further than a choice of any *one* of

the prevailing theoretical perspectives might allow. French (1992) focuses on two popular theoretical models for the explanation of male violence - the medical, which highlights the psychopathology of the individual perpetrator, and the gender-politics model, which focuses on the patriarchal world view. However, the emphasis is placed on the possibly villainous aspect of the behavior of the male, in that generally, violent behavior is seen to represent a somewhat conscious, or at least rationalized abuse of power. Gondolf (1985) states that attributing wife abuse either to a need to release anger (the empiricist perspective)[13], or oppress (the feminist perspective)[14] may only reveal a partial picture. He contends that *existential sociology*[15] may provide a framework which will allow for an integration of both the empiricist and feminist perspectives, the result being a more complete view. It may also be a more compassionate view.

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[13]Empiricists and clinicians place anger at the center of their analysis of male violence against women, and suggest that men are responding to certain stressors prevalent in the family and society, which are compounded by sex role expectations and socialization.

[14]The feminists place the male drive for control and dominance at the central to their analysis of wife abuse, and attribute violence to the male need to exert power and privilege, and keep women in their place.

[15]For a comprehensive definition of existential sociology, refer to Douglas and Johnson (1977, cited in Gondolf, 1985). For how this perspective has been applied to domestic violence, refer to Ferraro (1984, cited in Gondolf, 1985). In brief, this perspective focuses on the sense of self and the here-and-now situation of interaction that the self confronts. The emphasis is on how the individual attempts to attribute meaning to events, while respecting different levels of reality, from individual interpretations of face-to-face situations to the more objectified cultural historical significance.

> Violence ...[from an existential sociology perspective] has been interpreted as a means of validating the self. When persons perceive that they are being threatened, have become powerless, or have lost a sense of meaning or purpose, they assert themselves through the most expedient means available - violence. The violence affords at least a temporary sense of power and an affirmation that the individual is alive and has some impact on existence. There is, however, a double bind to the violence especially in the family. The violence causes mistrust and hostility in other family members. The husband consequently becomes more needy of reassurance and commitment from his alienated wife, thus increasing the chances of further violence from the man and resistance from the woman. (Gondolf, 1985, p. 320)

This explanation of the functional role of violence on the part of the abuser is interesting, in that it illustrates that from the perspective of the male abuser, there can also exist a cycle of violence and a deep bond with the partner. In the abuser's vicious circle, the validation of self-worth sought will only have meaning if it is given by the one who has been abused - hence the deep attachment.

Avery (1977) presents a compelling picture of how a woman's masochism can complement a man's sadism, resulting in an intricate dance where both are able to take alternating roles as either *pain-inducing* or *pain-suffering* object. The function of the dance for both is avoidance of object loss. The dance "is conducted under strict rules and both partners know precisely what the *bursting point* is of their object ties" (Avery, 1977, p.101). This dance is highly *scripted.* Overt expressions of wishes for affection

are more or less taboo, in that they represent weakness and dependence. They are ridiculed in the partner, and denied in the self. The ultimate aim is, while staying within the interactively negotiated boundaries, to "intimidate a potentially deserting partner into believing that the loss of the object will cause him more pain than his departure causes" (p. 102). However, Avery points out that the fundamental fear in such a scenario, for both partners, is that *internalized* sadistic objects (from childhood) are the real sources of abandonment threat - the partner is only a shell, meant to house the inner objects, in order to be able to battle it out externally. Thus, from this perspective, the roles of abuser and abused are interchangeable. Although in most cases, when the woman plays the role of the abuser (sadist), a fair fight with regards to physical assault is not available. However, when it comes to psychological attacks, by sheer practice and focusing of all talent and energy in one area, hers may be the advantage.

Men who abuse appear particularly vulnerable to attacks on their self-esteem (Neidig, Friedman & Collins, 1986). In fact, many perceive there to be an attack, when in fact, there may be none. In many cases, it may be too late to clarify the situation, since chances are, they have already lashed out violently against the *perpetrator* attacking their self-image. Abusive men have been found to have higher expectations of being taken advantage of than

non-abusive men (Neidig et al., 1986). Other findings point to higher levels of insecurity, lack of assertiveness, or poor verbal communication skills when compared with non-abusive men (Hofeller, cited in Davidovich, 1990). The personality profile that emerges does not point to a dominant, mean and hateful individual that one might have expected, judging by their actions. On the contrary, there is more evidence for fear, insecurity, even immaturity.

Elbow (cited in Davidovich, 1990) found evidence for four personality characteristics of batterers. These are:

1. The batterer transfers blame for marital conflict onto his partner and denies responsibility.
2. The batterer is threatened by his wife's autonomy. He is also overly dependent upon his wife to fulfill all his emotional needs. Therefore, he isolates himself from friends and expects the wife to do the same.
3. There is a strong tendency for the batterer to *parentify* his wife, viewing her much in the same way he perceived his mother. Thus, he repeated conflicts/emotional struggles that he had with his mother as a child.
4. He has rigid expectations of his wife, and expects her to conform to them at all times.

Although this profile points to insecurity and weakness, these qualities can in fact become quite dangerous in the extreme. For instance, in the case of blaming the wife for conflicts, Dutton (1986) found that "... those men who tend

to view their wife-victim as the cause of the violence are also likely to minimize [the severity, frequency, and effect of] their violence" (p. 388-389). Contrary to the cycle of violence theory, where men are supposed to be highly apologetic and contrite in their behavior, Dutton found that only 8% apologize after abusing their wives, while 80% act as if nothing happened. The men tested used a variety of techniques to neutralize self-punishment. Contrary to popular feminist beliefs, using the *cultural excuse*[16] was not one of the effective ones. The researchers concluded that ...

> we have yet to find a cultural group where consensus acceptance of severe wife assault exists, even in strongly patriarchal cultures. Rather, in our experience, self-justifying comparisons with a subjectively exaggerated cultural acceptance of wife assault serves an exonerative function to the man himself and in his presentation to an outgroup therapist. (Dutton, 1986, p. 389)

Extreme cases of the personality characteristics of batterers presented by Elbow can verge on pathological. Hamberger and Hastings (1986) found that only 12% of batterers showed no discernible pathology. Although no unitary batterer profile emerged, the vast majority had personality disorders, namely, schizoidal/borderline, dependent/compulsive, and narcissistic/anti-social.

Goldstein and Rosenbaum (1985) focused on the issue of self-esteem in abusive husbands, as it relates to their

[16]This excuse is used when men justify their violence against women by saying that it is acceptable within their culture.

perceptions of their wife's behavior, in greater depth. Abusive husbands were found to have significantly lower self-esteem than their non-abusive counterparts, and further were significantly more likely to interpret their wife's behavior as self-esteem damaging" (p. 427). However, the researchers are cautious in that they point out that directionality of conclusion cannot be made, in that abusing your wife in itself may be damaging to self-esteem. So, if an initial problem of deficient self-esteem exists, it may get worse. When it comes to the wife's alleged *assault* on the husband's self-esteem, they indicate that this could be a product of a combination of faulty perceptions on the part of the husband, and the wife's actual behavior. They stress the fact that faulty communication patterns between spouses, resulting in misperception, need further study. The notion of non-functioning communication patterns within a family-system as a possible determinant of family-violence has in fact been studied somewhat, and will be addressed further on.

Poor narcissistic development can lead to poor regulation of self-esteem. This in turn often underlies domestic violence (Rosen, 1991). Taking into account that many abusers suffer from a narcissistic/anti-social personality disorder, perhaps this aspect of the abuser's personality development should receive special attention. Even without pathological levels, self esteem affronts seem to be a pivotal factor in propelling a scene towards a

violent outcome. Thus, it is perhaps just as important to protect boys from poor narcissistic development, which can lead to poor regulation of self-esteem, as it is to protect girls from traumatic bonding. In both cases, understanding the psychodynamic process is necessary.

Pathological narcissism as a personality trait only exists as a difference of degree between what is normal, and not. The person with such a disorder, or for whom this aspect of personality did not develop properly, has easy psychic access and regression to an "immature, archaic, grandiose self" (Rosen, 1991, p.20). Three unconscious defence mechanisms are especially operative in violent individuals:

(1) *Projective identification,* where unwanted aspects of the self are projected onto others;

(2) *Turning passive into active*, which is a form of generational continuity, such that ...

> patterns of violent behavior or physical humiliations experienced passively in childhood are later enacted by the adult against his/her children or spouse, who is unconsciously identified with the original offending parents, whatever the sexual identity. Thus, to an assailant a wife victim could stand for a punitive mother or father. For the victim, the assailant may be unconsciously identified with the parent of either sex, and to whom they remain compulsively attached.[17] (Rosen, 1991, p. 20)

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[17]This is similar to the process of parataxic distortion (Arieti, cited in Lundberg, 1990), discussed earlier in this paper (p. 26).

(3) *Identification with the aggressor,* which enables patterns of violent behavior which are not experienced personally to be copied or stored preconsciously. These pre-formed imitative patterns of violence may be spontaneously triggered by esteem-lowering experience.

Overall, the violence erupting program in the abuser runs as follows:

> Should self-esteem suddenly fall or be threatened, trigger mechanisms operate, in those susceptible, like computer programs on a stock exchange, which execute orders spontaneously, sometimes leading to chaos. Violent behavior may therefore be triggered by a narcissistically wounding experience, or the sudden lowering of self-esteem below a critical level in a predisposed person, hitherto blameless in this regard. (Rosen, 1991, p.19)

Therefore, any attitudes or events which are perceived as a threat to the ego ideal and self-esteem can result in danger.

In conclusion, one should mention that as in the case of abused women, there is no one overall character profile for abusive men (Hamberger & Hastings, 1991). They too, are a heterogenous group. In addition to the characteristics already mentioned, alcohol and/or drug abuse can play a further significant role in fueling aspects of a volatile personality (French, 1992, Hamberger & Hastings, 1991; Roberts, 1987; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981).

PSYCHODYNAMICS OF THE FAMILY

Having looked at the process of violence from a more or less individual actor perspective, it is now worth stepping back and taking a wider view, namely, from a *family system* perspective. From this vantage point, such issues as role structures, the balance of power and control, adaptability, cohesion, and communication skills come to light, particularly their possible impact on the choosing of violent behavioral scripts. Also, aspects of larger sociocultural systems leave their mark on what happens in the home between abusive partners. A look at some of these more general influences follows.

Rosenbaum (1986) found that within the family, each partner played certain gender-related roles, and depending on how defined or fixed these were, different levels of marital harmony were reported. Where the husband was defined as being either feminine or androgynous, couples appeared to be happiest. Where the husband was undifferentiated, there was more dissatisfaction. Abusive husbands tended to be low in femininity as well as masculinity, less likely to be androgynous, and most likely to be classified as undifferentiated. Rosenbaum contends that the results ...

> ... suggest that males classified as undifferentiated are without a sex-role identity and consequently adopt a behavior pattern consistent with their conception of what a man should be like. This conception is influenced by society's projection of the macho image,

> which includes violence. It may also be influenced by violent role models observed in the family of origin.

This result was also compounded with the fact that low self esteem was found to be related to undifferentiated sex role identity. Low self esteem has already been shown to have an influence on the choosing of violent domestic scripts.

Goldner et al. (1990) consider the problem of volatile marital attachment from the perspective of gender-politics, or more precisely, with a view that stereotypical gender arrangements which structure intimacy between men and women, create insoluble relationship dilemmas which often erupt in violence. The female role is defined as one which does not allow the woman to feel a sense of personal power and independent subjectivity, as well as capacity for agency in the world. Therefore, she faces a deep need and struggle to claim these rights. Since this was not possible in the family-of-origin, she will attempt it with the spouse.

The male role, on the other hand, implies that a man has to reject the female side of his nature, and constantly deal with the conflict of keeping it at bay, managing it, and not letting it overtake him. At moments when this is threatening, he may use violence as a means to reassert his gender difference and male power. This is said to stem from the fact that boys are not truly close to their father, so instead of being *with* the father, they settle for being

like the father[18]. In a sense, both man and woman can be transformed as part of the marriage - she, of her own free will, and he, in response to her struggle, and perhaps against his will. Goldner et al, (1990) present a case of erupting violence from this perspective:

> Case
>
> **He:**
>
> [T]ransformation asks a lot of both partners in ordinarily troubled relationships ... it puts a special burden on the man who is violent and the woman whom he abuses. In these circumstances, such a man must tolerate a sense of weakness for perhaps the first time. Since his sense of personal power and psychic autonomy is an illusion that is sustained by denying his dependency needs through controlling his partner, he can become deeply threatened if he begins to see his mate as a person in her own right (who might leave, or disagree, or compete with him), Thus, he may fight against her attempts at independence despite the best of intentions. Indeed, for many of these men, the fear of disintegration, if they sense that the woman may leave *in any way*, is so great that they will frantically try to regain control by any means necessary. (Goldner et al, 1990, p. 349)

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[18]This type of analysis of parental male and female roles, and their influence on the gender-specific development of children, derives from feminist psychoanalytical theory.

She:

> If the woman is to retain a sense of her entitlement in the face of such intimidation, she must silence the voices from within her and the message from the culture at large. Everywhere she turns she will hear that she is transgressive if she fails to please him. When she does assert her right to her own experience, her own sexuality, her right to be cared for, he may term her hysterical, extravagant, or insatiable. He may threaten to leave her, thus signaling his social and economic superiority; or her may become violent, thus asserting his physical superiority. She may be confused by his rage because her experience of herself and his view of her are disparate; but she too has been raised in a culture that elevates the male perspective, so she may silence her own mind and submit to his construction of reality even if that means being hit. (Goldner et al., 1990, p. 349)

This illustrates how both may want to grow, or self-actualize as previously defined, but the pressures of culture, family, history all constrict and interfere. And perhaps when change is on the horizon, out of fear, the partners may sabotage it themselves.

POWER AND CONTROL CONFLICTS

> [E]very decrease in power is an open invitation to violence - if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands, be they the government, or be they the governed [individual], have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it.(Arendt, 1969, p.7)

There exist many power, authority and responsibility conflicts which may erupt in the home. These too can contribute to violent behavior patterns. For instance, conflict over child rearing, problems of perceived control, disagreement about the women's functioning as a mother, and

responsibilities in child care, among other factors, where found to be related to domestic violence (Edelson et al., 1991) In this respect, if the man's authority is slipping, "violence often generates coerced compliance to the perpetrator's wishes. Such compliance may enhance a man's sense of control over his immediate family environment" (p. 177). The interaction of need for control and dependency needs on the part of the abuser, can have a significant impact as well (Allen, Calsyn, Fehrenbach & Benton, 1989). For instance, it was found that for certain abusers

> ... self-perceived inability to take responsibility and assume authority with respect to others. ...[as well as] problems with authority, especially when pushed into new areas of responsibility, are believed to result in a variety of overlearned avoidant behaviors, ...[such as] temper outbursts, fist fights, and noisy emotional arguments" (p.86)

The very idea of loss of control can be distressing for abusive men, even in a hypothetical situation. In one study, a group of wife-assaulters watching videos of a man and woman arguing, reported more anger in response to the scenario than a control group, "especially in scenes in which the female had verbal power and appeared to be abandoning the male" Barnett, Fagan & Booker, 1991, p.219).

The actual family system may in itself have certain flaws, which reduce its efficiency with dealing the world *outside,* thereby creating tension, conflict, and possibly violence between the spouses. Lehr and Fitzsimmons (1991) looked at three dimensions of family behavior: *cohesion* (emotional bonding of members), *adaptability* (ability to

change power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules), and *communication* (facilitating dimension critical to the functioning of the other two), It was found that violent couples tended to be low on the measure of cohesion (they were more disengaged than enmeshed), and highly rigid an the adaptability scale. Norwood (1985) defined dysfunctional families as ones in which the roles were highly rigid. Thus, such a fixed social system, when attempting to deal with the challenges of everyday life, might indeed have friction creating problems, as well as no interpersonal resources for solving them.

THE DOMESTIC STAGE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE LARGER SOCIOCULTURAL THEATER

Finally, we emerge beyond the framework of the home and see what aspects of the larger sociocultural *theater* may impact on that microcosm. Levine (1986) suggests that widespread residential mobility, the weakening of parental and school authority, the impact of themes of violence and sexuality that are emphasized by the mass media and popular culture, all have a profound influence on family violence in North America. Furthermore, since "violent couples are [generally] subjected to more intense stressful life events, such as unemployment and financial difficulties, than are non-violent couples" (Roberts, 1987 p.82) there may be more of a tendency to find family violence in the

lower socioeconomic classes.

Conflict theory (Witts, 1987) of family violence, is yet another perspective. It proposes that in order to change patterns and levels of family violence in society, one must change aspects of culture itself.

> The goal is to reduce the amount of social stress produced by economic flux and to devalue violence as an appropriate response to stress in other aspects of social life. Women have approached parity with men in their participation in the economy. Continued efforts should reduce violence of the dominant/submissive variety. However, as long a culture rewards male aggression on the playground, it will produce young men who perceive threat in every social situation and are capable of expressing ritual violence on the spur of the moment. (Witts, 1987, p. 300)

Although the theory is relevant to a certain extent, the types of influences which are discussed are extremely general. The abusive couple's power to change the situation, should it be of great influence on their lives, is limited. Actions taken would require large scale participation from others, and would need to span a long time in that results would be extremely gradual.

Stress Theory (Farrington, 1986), which looks at the relationship of social stress to family violence may be a more useful paradigm, particularly to illustrate potential issues around which conflict would erupt, should the psychodynamics of the couple be escalating towards another round of violence. The balance between two factors forms the foundation for this theory; on the one hand, there are *stressor stimuli,* which result in the formation of

objective and subjective demands; while on the other, there are the response capabilities possessed by the individual or social system, from which the actor or social system can choose. The problem occurs when there is a discrepancy between the demand, and the coping behavior drawn from the response capabilities, in that the response which is offered, is not sufficient to adequately minimize or otherwise negate the demand.

Since there is much stress in families today, the need to cope as a cohesive, functioning, and supportive couple is evident. The stress is not necessarily due to dramatic and/or catastrophic events; sometimes very mundane, routine problems are the cause. Farrington (1986) contends that the modern family, as part of larger society, has considerable challenges, such as: maintenance of economic self-sufficiency; successful socialization of children; sexual satisfaction of marital partners, etc. Many families are not adequately equipped to handle stress; as previously stated, they might be deficient in cohesion, adaptability, and communication (Lehr & Fitzsimmons, 1991). In order to function well, on the individual actor level, one might expect to see intelligence, resourcefulness, and prior experience. On the family level, there might be a need for cohesiveness, viable legitimate power structures, communication capabilities, and social support from the community.

However, violence and aggression are only one possible

response to stress. One could also have positive goal-directed behavior, avoidance or denial. So why is the violent solution often chosen? Farrington posits that in many cases, violence is considered an appropriate and effective means to achieve what one desires - norms which legitimate it exists at the societal, subcultural, and family levels of social reality. On the other hand, eruption of domestic violence may equally be the result of ongoing patterns of interaction between the spouses, or learned scripts of dealing with problems. The stress then, in and of itself, is not the cause of violence, it is merely the catalyst. It awakens deviant possibilities established in childhood.

It is often the combination of stress from *within* the family (marital discord), as well as from the external environment (economic pressure, life events), which is the trigger. Straus (cited in Farrington, 1986) found "*Economic Plus Occupational Stress* and *Spousal Stress* ... highly related to husband-wife violence" (p. 139). Marital power distribution, extent of social integration/isolation, what resources each partner as well as both collectively possess, the similarity or differences in the partners beliefs and attitudes, crowding, alcohol or drug abuse, all these factors can contribute to the stress experienced by the family. Furthermore, as men and women reach towards equality within social institutions, sex-role strains and conflicts will probably escalate; in combination with

economic pressures and competition, they may become an increasingly potent stress factor to contend with.

Although we have moved beyond the frame of the couple, and addressed general sociocultural trends which may be a stress factor for families, it is worth narrowing the focus once more, in order to draw the curtain on Act II. The scene is this: The couple has escalated in its perpetuation of the cycle of violence. It is clear that neither partner is satisfied, but both are too afraid and too attached to consider termination of the relationship. External pressures may mount as the couple's internal problems get in the way of their dealing with the demands of everyday life. The situation is rotten, that is clear. Chances that it will change are slim. What will happen next? Let's suppose the abused considers leaving ... she will quickly realize, based on past experience, just what kind of havoc he can create if she does. Will she still attempt escape? But just the *thought* of leaving, *actually leaving*, reveals an elastic pull to stay. A strange force, keeping her planted in one spot, unable to move ...

ACT III: RESOLUTION

THE SYMBIOTIC BOND

Case

The Scene:

Joe and Alice, a couple who have sustained their feeling of specialness despite Alice's two broken ribs.

JOE

Maybe at one level we argue like hell, which is really true, but at another level me and Alice accept each other a hundred percent. She accepts my sensitivity and my weaknesses, unlike my mother, and she's given me a free rein to develop according to my own way of developing.

ALICE

I don't know why there is a bond between him and me, and not between me and anyone else. I don't know why that's true, except he allowed me to see his weaknesses. Therefore, I don't see him as a threat; even if he hits me I don't really see him as a threat. He allows himself to be vulnerable to me and I never had that role before, ever. That set our relationship. That formed the bond between us, and it's lasted to this day, damaged as it is. That hooked me.

(Goldner et al., p.361)

The bond between an abusive couple, the foundation of which lies in the belief (or hope) that love can repair past injuries and protect the lovers from the economic and sociocultural pressures of life, is fierce, indeed. "The

total relationship picture may sometimes make it appear to be a symbiotic union" (Coleman, cited in Lundberg, 1990, p. 244), where each partner nourishes profound psychological needs in the other, and each may feel as if they would perish without the other. In fact, often, the more outside forces try to sever the link, the more profound does it become. In trying to understand it, one cannot simply look at the dark, evil and violent side. In order to fully comprehend its power, one must also consider the flip side, the "face of atonement and redemption" (Goldner et al., 1990, p. 359). Perhaps the attachment is not so much to each other, but to the chance for transcendence, or self-actualization, that the relationship seemed to offer the protagonists in the first act of the drama.

Not to go too far beyond the confines of this discussion, it is worth mentioning the *Stockholm Syndrome*, in that attachment can develop even in paradoxical situations, where there is no offer of redemption or self-actualization. Even in the most extreme example of victimization, being held captive by a terrorist, rather than becoming distanced from their captor, the victim can grow emotionally attached to the extent that they require extensive de-programming upon release (Oots & Wiegele, 1985). This process has been referred to as "a defensive attempt by the victim to mitigate fear and helplessness ... and as a 'pathological transference based on terror,

gratitude, and infantile attachment'" (Young & Gerson, 1991, p. 33). So this binding of individuals by joint participation in affectively charged, intense experience is a phenomenon not easily explained.

It is estimated that between 49 to 60% of victims will return to their assailants. Although from the victim's point of view, such factors as "... lack of economic resources, traditional views about gender roles and family, few sources of love and support, coercion and fear, degree of severity of abuse..."(Young & Gerson, 1991, p. 30) can play a significant part in remaining in an abusive relationship, one should not ignore psychological need which may be a contributing factor as well. In addition to this, there may be poor self-image, hope that he will change, and belief in his expressions of sorrow or assurances that he *has* changed (Aguirre, 1985).

Perpetrators also exhibit psychologically dependence on their victims, as is evident from recurring stories in the popular press about the obsessive behavior of abusive husbands who cannot come to terms with being left by their spouse, often with fatal results. "Batterers interpret the woman's need to be independent as abandonment and often refuse to let the woman go, stalking her with unwanted phone calls, visits, and promises to change: behaviors that are all reminiscent of the third-phase of loving ..." in the cycle of violence scenario (Walker, 1991, p. 24).

The intensity of the bond between the abusive couple

must be understood, particularly since termination of the relationship may not remove the problem, as is illustrated by the frequency of *serial offender* and *serial victim* cases which end up in psychiatric case files (Makepeace, 1987). "Some abusing couples tend to establish serial abusive relationships, probably because they are at some level comfortable with the nature of abusive relationships or because they lack the personal skills or resources to develop healthy interpersonal relationships" (Lewis, 1987, p. 9).

RESOLUTION POINT:

BREAKING UP OR MAKING UP?

PERPETUATION OR TRANSCENDENCE?

"Some battered wives leave their husbands only when they are made to feel ashamed by their children." (Rosen, 1991, p. 21), or the abuse comes to involve the children, or becomes life-threatening to the wife (Dutton & Painter, 1981). But what if the fragile decision point is finally reached, simply because of recognition of the cycle, and because of having enough. If this moment is faced - honestly - how to resolve the story then?

Perhaps the more important question is not whether to break-up or make-up, but whether to transcend or continue perpetuating painful interpersonal strategies of

interaction (probably into the next generation). However, since breaking-up will not guarantee transcendence, a conscious effort must be made to grow out of the destructive habits. Yet even with effort, success is not assured; the lure of comfort in familiar roles may outweigh the benefits of constructing new modes of interacting.

The key to solving the riddle may emerge by tracing the progressively changing face of the *antagonist* in this story. The antagonist in drama is a person, persons, or system(s) who present obstacles for the protagonist (the hero/heroine of the story) to overcome in reaching their goal. At this point in time, we might consider the protagonist to be the partner considering escape, which taking into account the destructive quality of the relationship, can be equated with healthy reasoning. At the beginning of the story, the couple as a unit played the protagonist. At the onset, in Act I, both perceived everything beyond the frame of their love-bond to pose a threat, and thwart their dreams. *Us against the world* was the slogan of the day. However, by Act II, both partners, increasingly lonely and alienated, consider themselves to be the protagonist - the *right* one, while the other is wrong. They are each in their own private story - while they feign sharing the same one. At this stage, to each, the other is the antagonist. The goal is still happiness and an ideal home. Finally, at the present point in the story, the partner who is plotting escape, may suddenly

come to realize that they may be their own antagonist - keeping themselves from growing by staying in the abusive bond. Therefore, there has been a progression from: (1) the world is our problem and our enemy; to (2) my lover is my problem and enemy; and finally to (3) could it be that I am my own worse enemy?

Therefore, the first step in the transcendence process is to stop denying there is a problem. Denial plagues men and women in these situations. Towards healing, the men must finally admit to pain, and admit they feel powerless and weak, a feeling they have *beaten* out of their path in any way they could. The women must allow themselves to feel anger and to follow up on fulfilling subjective, personal needs. Generally, both must learn to trust, again, or maybe trust for the first time. The new form of trust must not be false - based on a glossy picture, where aspects that are hard to face in others are ignored. It must also be rooted in reality, and not embody a projection of fantasies. In a sense, the self-actualization process which may have been the unconscious dream, must be realized, but the only one who can truly enable that process, is the self, and not another.

AH! TO HEAL, BUT HOW

For the abused partner, who is often left suffering from what is known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the first step in a therapeutic process would be to take the time to re-assess life, and begin the process of *re-empowerment* and taking responsibility. There must be an honest facing up to harsh realities, without avoidance, and without searching for escape. Chances are, if there are children, even if the relationship with the abuser is terminated, it will continue in one form or another.

> More often than not, ... [Abusive] men continue to harass [their former partner] ... in subtle and large ways. Too often, no one wants to believe the woman that the abuse is continuing without any encouragement from her (Walker, 1991, p. 29).

Possibly the most unexpected result of victimization, is that the victim discovers their own capacity to be a victimizer, which along with other *negative* feelings, has generally been projected onto others (Catherall, 1991). Leaving the familiar scripts behind means facing the darker side of the self. Something that the partner expertly avoided as well, by often blaming her for the *fights*. The whole notion of blame can only act as a hindrance to healing. Often abused women have a hard time healing in that they will not be able to let go of suffering. They believe that "continued suffering blames the perpetrator" (Seagull & Seagull, 1991), while stopping it, would signify forgiveness in some way. This, in fact, may be one of the most fundamental reasons for having gotten trapped in such

a relationship in the first place; in that the suffering from childhood was still being re-staged, and forgiveness had not been given. Blame is attachment as well. This must be realized.

For the abusive men, some would assert that learning to deal with emotion is a first massive step which needs taking - but emotion which runs across a broad spectrum (Scher & Stevens, 1987). Historically, social pressure has forced men to limit their range of emotional expression (Waldo, 1987). If pain, hurt, sadness, fear, loneliness, intimacy, tenderness are discouraged, and only hatred, anger, dominance, hostility, competition are valued and encouraged, where do the others go?

Case

The Scene

> A little boy falls down in a public park. An elderly man passes by and comments ..."Stand up, grit your teeth ...don't show you hurt!" The boy stands, wondering what to make of this ... (Montreal, 1992)

The boy should wonder, and question. Men should be able to claim back their emotion and sensitivity. Scher and Stevens (1987) cite the following case:

Case

The Story:

> Frank is a 35-year-old man who scares his partner. He scares her because at times his anger is out of control .... His partner does not understand his frustration, primarily because he does not share his frustration with her in nonviolent ways. She does not understand why he has shoved her around the house, thrown things at her, and slapped her across the face. (Scher & Stevens, 1987, p. 352)

Analysis:

> Men who beat their partners hurt inside. Frank hurts so badly and feel so out of control that he cries with his fists. He has learned, from his father and other male role models, to seek relief and answers in ultimately futile ways when he feels out of control, unsure, and helpless. Frank needs a sense of self-respect, self-understanding, and self-love. Instead, he pursues domination, violation, and eventually self-pity. He feels sorry for himself; he hurts so much that he fails to realize that he is damaging others and himself. His focus is usually inward, and he is afraid of being rejected and abandoned. ... He knows how to fix his car and change the oil, and yet he does not know how to change a limited and restricted view of his world and of himself. (Scher & Stevens, 1987, p. 352-353)

Waldo (1987) suggests that men need to work at acceptance (instead of denial) of problems, as well as adjustment, or entering into close relationships (rather than isolation and bottling up thoughts and feelings). In general, the problems of low ego strength must be faced. Allen et al. (1989), on a more practical note, suggest addressing the following when treating abusive men:

> assure (1) safety for the victim; (2) breaking down common defense mechanisms such as minimization, denial, and projection of blame; (3) accepting the consequences of violent behavior; (4) working through the pain hidden beneath the anger, and (5) acquiring

> new skills in the area of anger management, communications, and problem solving. (p.87)

Many treatment programs for men address conflict resolution or anger management. There is an equal need to address deeper interpersonal difficulties, such as fear of intimacy and inclusion. It is probably equally true that different treatment programs must be developed for different subgroups. While for those with limited pathology and minimal histories of family violence, managing interpersonal conflict and arousal levels may be sufficient. For the more pathological cases, this will surely not suffice (Hamberger & Hastings, 1991).

For alcoholic and borderline disordered batterers, more intensive treatment is necessary. As for the abused women, men who have experienced (vicariously or directly) extreme and chronic levels of violence in the family-of-origin may require interventions not unlike those for post traumatic stress disorder. The advantages of groups or individual treatment may vary, according to individual.

In closing, Goldner et al. (1990) suggest a co-joint form of therapy where the violent moment is deconstructed, or retold with an eye to its subtext and underlying meaning. Of particular relevance is the noticing that current behavior towards the spouse often reflects conflicts with other people, particularly parents. In a sense the analysis and treatment proposed is similar to the one undertaken for this paper, in that a story is told,

from the beginning, from many different perspectives, those of: researchers, medical practisioners, victims, perpetrators, and finally, from the perspective of the author herself. Not only the dark outcome is deciphered, but also the luminous initial attraction. And for what purpose, one might ask ... what is the controlling idea behind the narrative of this analysis? To allow for a deeper understanding, perhaps, to those who have not shared the tale. Or, to illuminate the path for those who have, in some shape or form, played a part in abusive scripts. The outcome? As proposed by Goldner at al., (1990) ... so that as a result of such therapy , "the freedom to change the terms of the relationship or to leave it behind becomes possible" (p.363).

CONCLUSION

CONTROLLING IDEA OR COUNTER IDEA

> ...[an] infant begins a **dance** with ... [their] environment that will last throughout childhood. I believe it is the outcome of this dance that determines ... [their] sense of **helplessness** or **mastery.** (Seligman, cited in Young & Gerson, 1991, p.36)

So what can we conclude? Was the stated controlling idea for the abusive couple, the desire for self-actualization, truly the driving force of this story? And what of this analysis. Is it simply a psychoanalytic account of one particular strain of family drama? The fundamental question is, do childhood scripts have such power over individual destiny? There is evidence that they can; however, this can by no means represent a universal picture. Shafer (1984) brings up the idea of theme, storyline, or narrative organizing principle in his discussion of the role of the unconscious. He attempts

> ... to develop a case for regarding the unconscious as both found and made; more exactly, for regarding it as the product of dialogue or as co-authored text produced and progressively revised by two members of the same narrative and interpretive community. (p. 404)

This position is in harmony with the one taken in this paper. The scripts from childhood, rich with unconscious driving power, meet and merge with the present, and are shaped and transformed. It is only when the match is too precise perhaps that one can get stuck in rigid roles, the

very roles one was attempting to escape.

One is left with two key questions which need resolution. Is the behavior of an abusive couple reflective of unconscious motives, shaped by childhood exposure to behavioral scripts? If so, then the controlling idea stated at the onset was not the guiding motive in this story. It was its opposite, a dark, secret twin. The former might be seen as a motive for growth, while the latter, the consequence of disturbed ideal-self development, is a motive for regression to the past, and the comforts of the familiar. At a deeper level, perhaps the real distinction between the two motives is their approach to fear. One motive challenges fear, and faces it (by grappling with the new and the unknown in terms of ways of relating to people), while the other, avoids fear, and ironically, drives the actors to live it (basing current experience on old, yet known models).

According to Shafer, the pursuit of failure on the part of men, and the idealization of unhappiness on the part of women are common themes. Is the abusive relationship an expression of these two themes, merged within the joint narrative of marriage? Indeed, this may be one aspect of a possible explanation. However, on its own, this theoretical explanation is not sufficient. It becomes more complete when one juxtaposes a broad sociocultural framework and acknowledged the influence of a host of other equally potent factors.

In drawing the curtain on this story and interpreting its meaning, the role of the author as *analyst* must be taken into account. In constructing the possible life history scenarios of men and women caught in abusive relationships, despite efforts to the contrary, elements of a particular point of view were woven into the narrative. To assess the clarity of this subjective voice is up to each reader. However, as a result of having undertaken this mental journey, the following judgment is made:

> Better to have loved and lost, than not to have loved at all ... [Because in the losing, much can be gained]

Awareness of the interpersonal psychodynamics between abusive partners is the first step to potential healing of the dysfunctional behavior. However, such awareness must take into account the dark (losing) aspect, as well as the light (loving) aspect. Most importantly, the initial attraction between partners must be analyzed. This is crucial. It is necessary to understand what was so enticing, in order to avoid it again perhaps, or in order to be able to look for it inside the self, rather than looking for it in another. Putting the control for one's destiny and process of self-actualization outside the self, or in some dusty childhood scenes, which must be relived again and again, seems doomed to failure. The risk of stagnation is too great. The potential result might be a deeper descent into the very roles and traps one was trying to escape. Furthermore, the dependence on another for

growth, even on *family* (look what trouble they can cause!) is a concept worth revision as well. Even in the case of so called *healthy* couples, dependence needs and independence conflicts are a constant companion. Therefore, *self sufficiency*, meeting one's own needs without resentment or expectation, can be truly liberating. It is quite possible that the way to self-actualization is a lonely path, and although one can share it with another, one should not depend on being carried, or be forced to carry another. Self-sufficiency might most easily guarantee success for both.

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