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# Taking Child Abuse and Mothering Into Account

## Intersectional Feminism as an Alternative for the Study of Domestic Violence

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Feminist scholars have been engaged in an ongoing debate to determine which theoretical perspective offers the best framework for understanding domestic violence, and this debate has been crystallized around two pole positions: radical and postmodern feminism. This article presents a journey throughout the development of a theoretical perspective for the study of domestic violence, child abuse, and mothering. It argues that the intersectional feminist perspective has much to offer these debates and that it constitutes a promising theoretical framework for understanding domestic violence that takes into account issues of child abuse and mothering.

**Keywords:** *child abuse; domestic violence; motherhood*

Feminist scholars have been engaged in an ongoing debate to determine which theoretical perspective offers the best framework for understanding domestic violence. Radical feminism largely contributed to the recognition of domestic violence as a social problem in the 1960s and 1970s and remains an influential perspective (Bograd, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Martin, 1976). In this regard, Featherstone and Trinder (1997) argued that “what originated as an oppositional discourse has itself become a dominant and dominating discourse with fixed and unyielding discursive boundaries [and], in the process, other kinds of feminist analyses are marginalized” (p. 148). Most of our work in the area of domestic violence has also been located within a radical feminist perspective. However,

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we are presently conducting a study funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, from 2005 to 2008, and we have felt uneasy about the ways in which radical feminist scholars in the area of domestic violence have addressed issues of child abuse and mothering. Our concerns have been echoed in the work of other scholars, namely, those involved in the development of a feminist postmodern critique—an increasingly popular theoretical perspective in the area of domestic violence (Featherstone, 1996; Featherstone & Trinder, 1997). Nevertheless, we argue that although the postmodern feminist perspective provides an innovative theoretical framework, it is a problematic framework for the study of domestic violence.

This article presents our journey through the development of an alternative theoretical perspective for the study of domestic violence, child abuse, and mothering and draws on the research design that we developed in our study to illustrate some of the possible empirical applications of this theoretical perspective. The first section discusses radical feminism and how its analysis of domestic violence integrates issues of child abuse and mothering, as well as the epistemological, methodological, and ethical/political implications of such an analysis. The second section deals with postmodern feminism, particularly its critique of radical feminism and the new avenues it lays out. The third section identifies the three main issues that have emerged from the debate between these two perspectives. Finally we propose that intersectional feminism is a viable alternative for our study and present its empirical applications.

## **The Radical Feminist Analysis of Domestic Violence**

The fundamental postulate of radical feminism is that women are oppressed. Radical feminists maintain that the systemic oppression of women is caused by patriarchy—the system of social structures and practices through which men dominate, exploit, and oppress women (Walby, 1990). The early accounts of patriarchy focused mainly on issues of sexuality and violence (Millett, 1969), but recent accounts have presented more complex understandings of how patriarchy operates (Bryson, 1999; Walby, 1990). Violence against women remains one of the main dimensions of women's oppression, and domestic violence has been conceptualized as part of this larger problem (Bograd, 1988; Kelly & Lovett, 2004). In this context, the problem is not perceived as acts of violence by one person against another (Radford, Kelly, & Hester, 1996) but as a social and collective problem that reflects the unequal gender power relations in patriarchal societies.

A number of radical feminist scholars have also established a meaningful link among domestic violence, child abuse, and mothering; they have maintained that, in patriarchal societies, men dominate both women and children. In this context, men are more likely than women to be violent toward their children, especially in a context of domestic violence (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). When child abuse is committed by women, it is primarily seen as a means of defense or a survival strategy that women use in a context in which they have little power (Lavergne, Jacob, & Chamberland, 2001). These ideas are consistent with the radical feminist understanding of mothering and of how the institution of motherhood operates in patriarchal societies. Indeed, radical feminists have viewed mothering as yet another important dimension of women's oppression (Chase & Rogers, 2001; Firestone, 1970; Rich, 1976) and have argued that even though women's experiences of mothering have the potential to empower women, these experiences take place within the institution of motherhood, a patriarchal institution that fundamentally oppresses women (O'Reilly, 2004;

Rich, 1976). In the context of domestic violence, motherhood heightens the vulnerability of both women and children; women's mothering is targeted in men's use of violence against women and children (Mullender et al., 2002; Radford & Hester, 2006), and Kelly (1994) suggested the concept of the double level of intentionality to theorize the relationship among domestic violence, child abuse, and (implicitly) mothering: "Part of what needs to be understood here is a double level of intentionality: that an act directed towards one individual is at the same time intended to affect another or others" (p. 47).

Epistemologically, radical feminists have developed feminist standpoint theory, which maintains that women's conditions of oppression give them a privileged epistemological position; women who are willing to make the effort can develop an understanding of both their own experiences and the patriarchal system within which their experiences take place (Harding, 2004). Therefore, radical feminists tend to privilege women's perspectives in research and to consider women as "experts" and collaborators in the research process (Hoff, 1988; Roberts, 1981). For radical feminists, the development of knowledge is closely linked to the struggle against women's oppression, and it contributes to the development of a collective consciousness and to the growth of sisterhood (Radford, 1994). In the area of domestic violence, radical feminist researchers have exerted political pressure for its recognition as a social problem and for the implementation of resources to support and shelter women and children who are living with domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Martin, 1976; Radford, 1994).

## Postmodern Feminism and Its Critique of Radical Feminism

Numerous authors have attempted to integrate feminism and postmodernism (see, e.g., Butler, 1992; Nicholson, 1990; Weedon, 1997). In the area of domestic violence, postmodern feminists have focused mainly on putting forth a critique of radical feminism and proposing new avenues for the study of this problem; the primary influences on these authors have been psychoanalysis and poststructuralism. First, postmodern feminists reject any form of essentialism or universalism and argue that radical feminism and its theory of patriarchy are based on foundations that are both essentialist and universalist. In contrast, they view social problems as discursive constructions—variable as well as historically and culturally specific. Featherstone and Trinder (1997) discussed domestic violence in the following terms:

What appears to be clear then is that "domestic violence" is not a given; its meaning, or even its existence, is not transparent. Rather "domestic violence" is discursively constructed. The recognition and naming of a phenomenon as "domestic violence" is by no means constant or consistent. (p. 148)

The postmodern critique is further structured around the issues of differences, subjectivities, and power. First, postmodern feminists have argued that radical feminists naturalize and overemphasize differences between women and men and thus pay insufficient attention to differences among women and among men (Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000; Featherstone & Trinder, 1997). To address this issue, postmodern feminists have focused on differences and have challenged references to "all women" or "all men," with some authors even contesting the very categories of "woman" and "man." Postmodern feminists have also rejected the idea of a fixed and coherent subject and have argued that both women and men can perform a spectrum of constructed subjectivities, which are shifting and sometimes even

conflicting (Davies & Krane, 2003; Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000). The range of subjectivities that one individual can perform are made available (and are limited) through dominant or oppositional discourses. Finally, postmodern feminists have argued that by conceptualizing power as being located primarily within social structures, radical feminism has constructed women as passive and powerless victims. They have viewed power as more complex and dynamic and have emphasized how power relations play out in specific contexts (Fawcett & Featherstone, 2000).

As we mentioned earlier, child abuse and mothering have been important aspects of the postmodern feminist critique of radical feminists. According to Featherstone (1996),

This approach [radical feminism] does not explore the possibility that the women may occupy a range of subject positions which shift. They may be victims in one situation, for example in relation to their husbands, but in relation to the family centre worker or their children they may be in a position of power for a variety of reasons. They can therefore be both victim and victimizer and these positions themselves shift; for indeed children grow up, workers move on, agency policy changes. (p. 183)

For postmodern feminists, a major concern is the assumption in the work of radical feminists that the interests of women/mothers and children always coincide. In this regard, Featherstone and Trinder (1997) argued that “this is not to argue that women do not often fight for their children’s well-being, but there is a problem in assuming that they always do, and there is a further problem in developing policies which assume they will” (p. 153).

Therefore, postmodern feminists have focused on the multiple and complex connections among the discursive constructions of domestic violence, child abuse, and mothering. Namely, they have argued that it is crucial to recognize the complex power relations between women/mothers and children, the ambivalence that women/mothers generally feel toward their children (Featherstone, 1999; Hollway & Featherstone, 1997; Parker, 1997), and therefore the possibility that women/mothers will be violent toward their children (Featherstone, 1996; Laverne et al., 2001).

Epistemologically, the postmodern feminist perspective is different from radical feminism, as postmodern feminists reject the notion of a material reality that exists independent of discourse and thus do not believe that women’s experiences provide any account of the reality (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Scott, 1992; Tanesini, 1999). Therefore, rather than attempt to determine the causes of domestic violence, postmodern feminists seek to identify the various discourses in operation in specific historical and cultural contexts; they are particularly interested in the processes by which these discourses shape power relations and construct subjectivities (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Tanesini, 1999). However, this focus does not mean that they have no interest in women’s perspectives, as Davies and Krane (2003) pointed out:

If we accept the need for a more flexible and non-standardized approach, further consideration must be given to the battered woman’s own understanding of her identity and experience. Her account of the violence in her life and its meaning to her must become central in the helping process. (p. 69)

An important issue with postmodern feminism is that it tends toward individualism and relativism and rarely provides the basis for collective political actions. However, although it may be viewed as more politically conservative (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002), it can nonetheless lead to positive changes in the area of domestic violence intervention. As Davies and Krane (2003, p. 68) noted,

This critique is significant for feminist practice within shelter settings wherein the various and multiple facets of a woman's identity are transformed into one overarching identity—a “battered woman.” In practice, this aspect of her identity predominates over other facets of her social location and relationships.

### Key Issues of the Debate

In our opinion, postmodern feminism is not necessarily the way forward to develop a better understanding of domestic violence that takes child abuse and mothering into account. Three theoretical key issues need to be examined in this regard. The first issue is the issue of differences. We agree that it is necessary to recognize that there is no universal womanhood (or manhood) and that the failure by some radical feminists to do so has implications for the study of domestic violence, child abuse, and mothering (Featherstone, 1996; Featherstone & Trinder, 1997). However, postmodern feminists focus on differences at the expense of the recognition of commonalities among women or among men, which is why we privilege the concept of diversity, rather than differences, in this context; the former is not charged with a postmodern connotation (Evans, 1995; Hughes, 2002; Truman, 1994). Indeed, we argue that it is important to acknowledge diversity but to recognize commonalities among women and among men, as well as differences between women and men as two social (rather than biological) groups.

The second issue is the issue that postmodern feminists call subjectivities, but that we prefer to call identities. As Krane and Davies (2002) pointed out, it is necessary to consider women's multiple identities in both intervention and research in the field of domestic violence: “Traditionally, such a woman is seen only in parts as a woman or a mother, victims or survivors, but not all at once. Her characteristics are assumed to exist separately, and her identity is fragmented” (p. 186). However, postmodern feminists' conceptualization of subjectivities is different and problematic, as Maynard (1994) argued:

The deconstruction of the self into multiple modes and forms of identities, existing only at the intersection of discourses, raises questions about self-conscious activity. Paradoxically, although everything is about the subject, no one in postmodern analyses actually appears to do anything. Subjectivities are seemingly overdetermined by the discourses in which they are constituted, and thus lacking in both intentionality and will. (p. 19)

The third issue is the issue of power. Recognizing diversity among women, as well as among men, means that power cannot be conceptualized simply in terms of structural gender relationships. As postmodern feminists have pointed out, conceptualizing power only in relation to gender is particularly problematic for the study of child abuse and mothering (Featherstone, 1996; Featherstone & Trinder, 1997). However, it is also highly problematic to conceptualize power as circulating evenly through all interpersonal relationships (Radford et al., 1996), because certain individuals and groups continue to have limited access to power (Kelly, 1988); this view of power increases the risks of blaming the victims for the violence that is perpetrated against them (Hartsock, 1990). Thus, we privilege a conceptualization of power as being relational and decentralized but, at the same time, recognize the existence of multiple systems of oppression, including patriarchy, capitalism, and racism.

In addition to these three theoretical key issues, it is necessary to discuss some epistemological and ethical and political issues. At a general level, postmodern feminists have criticized radical feminism for being rooted in essentialist assumptions; this critique is

related to the three theoretical issues just discussed but is also closely linked to their different stances on material reality. As Jackson (1998) noted, "since materialist social scientific perspectives presuppose a 'real' world outside and prior to discourse, [they] will always be irreconcilable with much postmodernist thinking" (p. 25). Although we share the concern of postmodern feminists about avoiding essentialism or universalism in any form, we believe that the physical dimensions of domestic violence, child abuse, and mothering make it impossible to focus solely on discourse. Although women's experiences do not provide a direct and unproblematic account of reality (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002), documenting women's perspectives gives one partial access to reality and thereby reveals the material conditions of women's lives. However, it is crucial to contextualize women's accounts and the conclusions we propose, that is, to recognize that they are historically and culturally specific. Finally, we believe that the theoretical and epistemological position that we have proposed may lead to the development of collective social or political actions and avoids essentialist assumptions. This position leads us to consider the intersectional feminist perspective as a promising alternative for understanding domestic violence that takes into account child abuse and mothering.

### **Intersectional Feminism: An Alternative**

Intersectional feminism was initially developed in response to the concerns voiced by groups of marginalized women and women of color that were related to the universalizing of White, middle-class, Western women's reality in feminist theories, namely, radical feminism (see, e.g., Afshar & Maynard, 1994; Collins, 2004; hooks, 1984). However, Crenshaw (1994) pointed out that a distinction needs to be made between intersectionality and the closely related perspective of antiessentialism, which is rooted in a postmodernist framework:

While the descriptive project of postmodernism of questioning the ways in which meaning is socially constructed is generally sound, this critique sometimes misreads the meaning of social construction and distorts its political relevance. . . . One version of antiessentialism . . . is that since all categories are socially constructed, there is no such thing as, say, Black or women, and thus it makes no sense to continue reproducing these categories by organizing around them. . . . But to say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has not significance in our world. (p. 1297)

Intersectional feminism constitutes an alternative to radical or postmodern feminism for developing an understanding of domestic violence that takes into account child abuse and mothering. Its potential in the field of domestic violence has already been argued (see, e.g., Krane, Oxman-Martinez, & Ducey, 2000; Mosher, 1998; Oxman-Martinez, Krane, Corbin, & Loiselle-Léonard, 2002) but with little or no attention to issues of child abuse or mothering. According to Mosher (1998),

From this vantage point, multiple and intersecting forms of oppression (including sexism) help to explain the violence in women's lives. This perspective suggests that no single account or meta-theory is capable of explaining violence against women. Rather, the account/explanation must vary according to the intersecting forms of oppression present in the life of a woman, and these will be connected to particular historical, cultural, and social factors. (p. 147)



Categories are important in the work of intersectional feminists, and they allow for the recognition of diversity among women; gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation constitute major categories of analysis. A greater number of categories are used (rather than just gender), and these categories are also more fluid and shifting; they are considered to represent not women's individual characteristics but aspects of women's social identity (Krane et al., 2000; Oxman-Martinez et al., 2002). In this sense, the category of mother can be incorporated into the analysis because it constitutes a significant aspect of social identity for many women.

For intersectional feminists, the relevance of these categories is that they reflect existing power relations in our societies because power operates at several levels, including the individual, systemic, and structural (Krane et al., 2000; Oxman-Martinez et al., 2002). At the more structural level, intersectional feminists acknowledge the existence of multiple systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and heterosexism. Consequently, scholars need to "emphasize the structural underpinnings of abuse while not denying the existence of real differences among battered women from diverse backgrounds" (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005, p. 45). The category of mother also reflects existing power relations in our societies; the concept of motherhood could be used to refer to this system of oppression. Indeed, Glenn (1994) argued that "mothering takes place in social contexts that include unequal power relations between men and women, between dominant and subordinate racial groups, between colonized and colonizers" (p. 17).

Finally, we argue that child abuse should be considered primarily in relation to mothering/motherhood and ageism, in conjunction with the other categories and systems of oppression; we believe that this perspective allows for a more complex understanding of child abuse, one that takes into account the power relations between women/mothers and children and their connection with women's identities and multiple systems of oppression.

## **The Empirical Application of Intersectional Feminism**

Intersectional feminism is an emerging theoretical perspective, and little has been written about its implications at the empirical level (see McCall, 2005); the multilayered analysis that is involved means that applying this perspective empirically is a complex undertaking. For intersectional feminists, the development of knowledge is intimately linked with the struggle against the oppression of different groups of women. Sokoloff and Dupont (2005) emphasized the importance of developing collaborative research projects involving women at different stages in the research process, thus increasing the chances of drawing interpretations and conclusions that correspond to women's specific realities. Although we did not develop an action-research design for our study, the study has involved collaborative work with community partners. First, there is a research committee that is composed of the researchers, two community partners, and the students who are involved in the project; the objectives of the project, the theoretical framework, and the methodology were discussed by this committee. The main aspects of the analysis will also be discussed by this committee.

If a study is to apply an intersectional feminist perspective, it is important for the research objectives and research questions to reflect this intention; they should explicitly state the aim of developing an understanding of the intersection of multiple identities and multiple systems of oppression and should mention the particular categories on which the study focuses (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). A study could focus on one particular problem

but encompass a large number of analytical categories—all the social identities and systems of oppression that may be relevant for understanding the problem. However, limitations in human, financial, and time resources mean that researchers have to make choices and often must focus on a few specific dimensions of women's lives. For instance, Crenshaw (1994) studied violence against women of color in the United States; she pointed out that her work does not suggest that violence against women of color can be explained only through the framework of race and gender. Our research project has focused on domestic violence, child abuse, and mothering and has been conducted in the Province of Québec (Canada), which is a largely French-speaking province and to which a large number of people from Black and minority ethnic communities have migrated within the past 30 years. Although the main research team has studied a general population of French-speaking women, the students have focused on specific groups of women, including Aboriginal women, African immigrant women, English-speaking women, and urban and rural women. In this way, our project has taken into account the women's diverse experiences and has considered the women's multiple identities and several forms of oppression.

We argue that a research project involving a multimethod design (including both quantitative and qualitative methods) or a large-scale qualitative research design may be ideal but that a relatively small-scale qualitative study can make a significant contribution to the development of a better understanding of women's multiple identities and the various systems that create their conditions of oppression. Qualitative methods need to account for women's individual and collective experiences, as well as for both differences and commonalities in these experiences. Our research has drawn on a qualitative methodology and has involved a sample of approximately 80 women; the part of the project that has been conducted by the main research team has involved 40 women, and the parts conducted by the students have each involved an additional 10 women. Our population is also composed of mothers who abused their children and mothers whose children have been abused by their partners.

Furthermore, we developed an interview schema that could take into account all forms of oppressions (age, gender, class, race, sexual orientation, medical condition, etc.). In addition, the data analysis has been designed to consider different forms of oppressions. For example, a woman whose husband was born in Africa was often asked from which country her adopted children came from; this element had an important influence on her identity as a mother. A woman from a working-class background chose her husband because she admired his family's intellectual background; this aspect was most important in the later violence that she and her son experienced. How do rural women live in a context of domestic violence when everybody in the town knows what they are living through? But is the experience of a rural woman the same for an Aboriginal woman who is living on or off a reservation, or does the Aboriginal women live an experience that intersects with the racism of the services, such as child protection services? If so, how is her experience different? In short, each woman's experiences will be explored in her own context in relation to the different oppressions that she lives. Afterward, we will explore the experiences of women who are living the same types of oppression, such as racism. We will undoubtedly have to take into consideration that all women who live racism can also have different experiences of oppression. Not all African immigrants are poor, for example. But it is also possible that African immigrant women live forms of racism that are close to what some Aboriginal women live.

Finally, we will have reached women with diverse identities, but our analysis will allow us to identify experiences that are common for all the women we have met. In this way, our final analysis will also take into account the intersection of all these forms of oppression. So even though we are conducting a relatively small-scale qualitative study, we think that

it may significantly contribute to the development of a better understanding of women's multiple identities and the various systems that create their conditions of oppression.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the two dominant theoretical perspectives in the field of domestic violence, namely, radical feminism and postmodern feminism. We first expressed some of our concerns with the ways in which radical feminists understand domestic violence and integrate child abuse and mothering into this understanding. Because some of these concerns have been echoed in the postmodern feminist critique, we have also examined this critique and the new avenues suggested by the study of domestic violence, child abuse, and mothering. However, we have contended that postmodern is not necessarily the way forward if we want to develop an understanding of domestic violence that takes into account issues of child abuse and mothering. Instead, we have argued that intersectional feminism constitutes a promising theoretical perspective for the study of domestic violence that allows one to explore the multiple and complex links among domestic violence, child abuse, and mothering. We believe that considering simultaneously women's multiple social identities and several systems of oppression is the way to take these links into account. Intersectional feminism is an emerging theoretical perspective, and although we have presented some possibilities for its empirical application, much work remains to be done in this area.

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