The Evolution of Domestic Abuse as a Process (DAP) Model: An Initial Statement

Jessica L. Burke[*], Lisa A. Eargle and Jessica M. Doucet

Francis Marion University, Florence, USA

Abstract: A new model of intimate partner violence, the Domestic Abuse Process (DAP) model, is presented to address how domestic abuse emerges, evolves, and escalates in a romantic relationship over time. A review of the relevant literature on intimate partner violence, including studies examining the role of resources, relationship goals and means for achieving these goals, and relationship stressors is conducted. Important theories such as symbolic interactionism, strain, intergenerational transmission of violence, and the process model of family violence are also reviewed and discussed within the context of domestic abuse. A short discussion of how the proposed model could be empirically tested using a survey instrument containing numerous items that are administered to respondent couples is provided. Follow-up interviews with respondent couples would be used to clarify survey responses and to obtain more detailed insights into how abuse entered and intensified in respondent relationships. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses would be performed on the subsequent data to glean important factors and patterns empirically involved in the process. The model provides additional insights into intimate partner violence and abuse that could inform treatment practices and policy.

Keywords: Intimate Partner Violence, Domestic Abuse, Family Violence, Violence Escalation, Relationship Goals, Intergenerational Transmission of Violence, Strain Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is the focus of the Domestic Abuse Process (DAP) Model presented in this paper. IPV involves abuse or aggression that ensues in a married, cohabiting, or dating romantic relationship. Instances of domestic abuse vary in frequency, duration, and severity ranging from happening once to multiple episodes over many years. An intimate partner includes one's spouse, former spouse, cohabiting partner, boyfriend or girlfriend, dating partner, or a person with whom one is intimately involved. There are several types of IPV, including physical and sexual violence, stalking, and psychological abuse or aggression (Breiding *et al.* 2015). The DAP is a theoretical model designed to understand the emergence and evolution of domestic violence and abuse in various contexts. This model aims to inform public policy that addresses this issue. Domestic violence or abuse is a major public health concern where approximately 41% of women and 26% of men experience physical abuse, sexual violence, or stalking by an intimate partner over a lifetime. In addition, over 61 million women and 53 million men report experiencing psychological or emotional abuse/aggression by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Leemis *et al.* 2022).

As a major problem in the United States and worldwide, consequences for the individuals and families involved, as well as society, cannot be understated. IPV results in physical injuries, chronic health conditions (including ailments involving cardiovascular, digestive, and nervous systems), mental health problems (such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder), and in some cases death (Jack *et al.* 2015; Niolon *et al.* 2017). Additionally, children who witness IPV are at a higher risk of becoming either abusers or victims in later romantic relationships (Gover, Kaukinen, and Fox 2008; Hamby, Finkelhor, and Turner 2012; Manchikanti Gomez 2011). While costs are devastating for individuals and families who experience IPV, the impact on society is also great. For instance, over 3 trillion dollars is lost due to medical costs to treat injuries, loss of productivity at work, and costs involving the criminal justice system during a victim's lifetime. Individually, the cost of IPV for victims is over $103,000 for women and over $23,000 for men during their lifetime (Peterson *et al.* 2018).

The growing costs of domestic violence to individuals and society have warranted significant research in this area. However, much of this scholarship has focused on the causes and correlates of violence rather than the process of abuse (Adams *et al.* 2013; Campbell *et al.* 2020; Hattery and Smith 2020). This paper aims to expand the literature by presenting a specific process model (DAP) that explores the characteristics, goals, and means of both the victim and abuser, how these components impact the initial and subsequent interactions between the couple, the outcomes of such interactions (including

*Address correspondence to this author at the Department of Sociology, Francis Marion University, Florence SC 29502-0547, USA;
E-mail: jburke@fmarion.edu

the recognition of abuse), and the decision to stay or exit the relationship. This model examines domestic abuse as a process as opposed to a specific event. In particular, an abusive relationship generally evolves beginning with non-abusive to subtle abusive interactions that progress to the classic cycle of abuse with increasing intensity and frequency over time, but with periods of calmness: (1) the tension-building phase, (2) the incident, (3) the honeymoon or reconciliation phase, and (4) calm (Walker 2016). However, the DAP model explores the finer nuances of victim and abuser experiences, resources, and expectations, how interactions are attributed over time, the goals of the victim and abuser, the means they use to achieve those goals, and the outcomes of their interactions. Three theoretical perspectives are utilized to inform the development of the DAP model: symbolic interactionism (SI), Robert Merton's strain theory, and intergenerational transmission of violence theory (IGT).

LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The recent literature on domestic violence or abuse generally focuses on the impact of COVID-19 and quarantine on domestic violence rates (Bright, Burton, and Kosky 2020; Hsu and Henke, 2021; Kourti *et al*. 2023; Sharma and Borah 2020), the availability and accessibility of service or reporting domestic violence to law enforcement or emergency personnel (Bates and Douglas 2020; Leigh *et al*. 2023; Lustig, Fishenson, and Natan 2022; Kimberg *et al*. 2021), female perpetrators and male victims of domestic violence (Hine, Bates, and Wallace 2022; Mshweshwe 2020; Scott-Storey *et al*. 2023), and domestic violence in nations beyond the United States (Chen and Chan 2021; Iezadi *et al*. 2021; Wali *et al*. 2020). While research in the areas mentioned above is important, IPV, at its core, is a series of interactions between two individuals in a close, romantic relationship. There are theories that focus on the cycle of abuse or the process of being in a relationship, including Lenore Walker's (2016) perspective involving the classic cycle of abuse and the intergenerational transmission of violence. However, there appears to be a gap in the literature that focuses on domestic violence as a process model that not only emphasizes the evolving interactions over time, but incorporates the experiences, expectations, and meanings two individuals bring to the relationship, how interactions and subsequent interactions are shaped over time, the goals of the victim and abuser, and outcomes. The DAP model described later in this paper seeks to add to the literature on domestic abuse by detailing a more specific picture of how such relationships evolve.

Another model – the Process Model of Family Violence (FVEPM) – has been proposed by Stairmand and colleagues (2021) to explain how violent events unfold in families by highlighting the importance of interactions and outcomes of domestic violence. This model discusses four main stages of a family violence event, including antecedent or background conditions, event formation, event, and post-event. While this model captures the background characteristics of the abuser and victim, incorporates a specific sequence of interactions that lead to the violent event, and discusses the aftermath of the event, the DAP model expands on the FVEPM by focusing on a feedback loop that portrays how interactions evolve resulting in the initial and subsequent abusive events, integrating the role of strain that is both specific to the relationship and outside of the relationship, and acknowledging that domestic abuse intensifies over time, where the violence escalates from subtle and innocuous to blatant and vicious.

The development of the DAP model was influenced by several theoretical frameworks and research that inform various stages of the process. SI is the primary theory used to explain the interactional components of the model. Merton's strain theory supplies support for how the victim's and abuser's resources, goals, and means impact their interactions. Finally, the IGT perspective is used to explain the influence of previous experiences on the interactions between the victim and abuser. Each of these theoretical frameworks, along with supporting literature, is discussed below.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism (SI), mainly influenced by George Herbert Mead of The Chicago School, focuses on individual micro-scale interactions that inform larger societal processes. Thus, individuals create their subjective sense of reality. SI scholars examine subjective meanings and how people make sense of the world around them, including how continuous interactions between people come to shape society. To communicate, individuals use language and symbols to convey meaning, and shared language and symbols generally allow for successful interactions (Mead 1934). According to Blumer (1969), there are four basic tenants of SI: (1) Individuals act according to the meaning of objects; (2) Interaction transpires within certain contexts where objects and situations must be defined or categorized; (3) Meanings materialize as a result from social interactions with other individuals and society; (4) Meanings are created and recreated across

multiple interactions as people continually interpret their interactions with others.

Individual characteristics can shape a person's subjective viewpoint of others and situations. These characteristics can also influence domestic abuse outcomes and how such interactions are experienced. An individual's location in the social hierarchy is determined by one's race, class, gender, religion, and age, and this also shapes the meaning people attribute to certain interactions and situations (Hollander and Howard 2000). According to Stryker (1980), people develop identities because they occupy particular social roles, including, but not limited to race, gender, class, and marital status, and such identities play a formidable part in how people interact with others. Furthermore, it has also been suggested that identities are formed via interaction, specifically the negotiation process where mutual definitions of the situation are created by all parties (McCall and Simmons 1978). Indeed, abusive interactions and outcomes are found to vary based on one's characteristics or social roles and other issues like mental illness and substance abuse. For example, Black, unmarried, and relatively younger females between the ages of 20 to 39 tend to experience higher rates of victimization, while abusers tend to be unemployed and intoxicated at the time of the abusive incident (Campbell *et al*. 2020). Hence, these specific characteristics may potentially influence the meanings attributed to the situation of entering, remaining, and potentially exiting an abusive relationship.

Thus, applying SI to the DAP model would indicate that the meaning of situations and interactions is based on the background characteristics of both the abuser and victim and the negotiated meanings between both parties as the relationship unfolds. According to the DAP model, initially, both parties bring their subjective meanings into interactions based on their background antecedents (e.g., characteristics). As the relationship progresses from the first interaction to subsequent interactions, meanings are negotiated and renegotiated to create a shared meaning for those in the situation. In the case of abuse, the victim may come to share the abuser's perspective that they deserve the abuse and that they are to blame because "they made" the abuser hurt them. Or, at some point in the relationship, the victim may choose not to endure the abuse when it first begins or may decide to end the abuse and exit the situation.

The concept of "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987) is a further application of SI to abusive relationships. Family scholars suggest that men and women both reinforce and challenge gender role stereotypes during interactions with each other. This is the essence of doing gender, but when gender roles are reinforced at extreme levels, such as a man turning to violence, a domestic abuse cycle may occur. A man may use violence to reaffirm his masculinity or "doing gender" that overly reinforces the gender role stereotype of men (i.e., to be aggressive and violent). Likewise, a woman may attempt to pacify her partner by also engaging in doing gender, such as ensuring dinner is on time, preparing foods that the abuser likes, being home on time, or quitting a job (Hattery and Smith 2020). As applied to the DAP model, "doing gender" will occur across all interactions in the abusive relationship, from the initial meeting to subsequent positive and negative interactions. Victims may stay in the relationship because of being socialized that it is the feminine role to be cooperative, gentle, and maintain peace and should "do gender" accordingly (West and Zimmerman 1987). Yet, "doing gender" also consists of challenging gender role stereotypes, which may help explain when a victim exits an abusive relationship or fights back or retaliates against her abuser.

Robert Merton's Strain Theory

According to Merton (1938), criminal behavior stems from the inability to meet societal goals or cultural expectations. When an individual cannot achieve a goal or is blocked from meeting a goal, they will adapt by either finding alternate ways of meeting the goal or rejecting the goal altogether. Hence, strain theory is a bridging theory that connects aspects of, or conditions in society, to individual-level decision-making and behavior. For Merton (1938), the main goal in the U.S. is acquiring wealth, and if a person is blocked from achieving this goal (e.g., the inability to attend college), they may adapt by becoming an innovator. An innovator is a person who accepts the goal (wealth) but rejects the cultural or normative means of achieving the goal, such as working hard, going to school, etc. A person can also adapt to the inability to achieve wealth via ritualism (reject the goal, accept the means to achieve that goal), retreatism (reject the goal, reject the means to achieve that goal), and rebellion (rejects the goal, rejects the means, and replaces it with a new goal and means).

Merton (1938:678) also recognizes goals go beyond economic success and references "any other type of highly valued success." Perceived success in a relationship may be a highly valued goal for many individuals. Thus, when the traditional means of achieving that goal are blocked, abusers may turn to violence. Mason and Smithey (2012) argue that violence, including domestic violence, is a means to achieve a goal, thus a person may turn to innovation (accept the goal but reject the normative means to obtain the goal) to achieve what is perceived as a successful relationship. Merton (1938:678) suggests that the outcome of blocked goals is "determined by the particular personality, and thus, the particular cultural background, involved." Thus, individuals will respond uniquely when they encounter strain. Merton (1938:678) further argues that "inadequate socialization will result in the innovation response whereby the conflict and frustration are eliminated by relinquishing the institutional means and retaining the success-aspiration." Hence, abusers may become innovators, or resort to violence due to personality traits, cultural backgrounds, and socialization.

In the context of a romantic relationship, goals may include companionship (healthy partners), maintaining patriarchal power in a relationship (abuser), or maintaining peace in a relationship (victim). For a healthy couple, the means of achieving companionship, as an example of a goal, may involve the following: Spending time together, sharing hobbies and interests, providing emotional support, and having regular date nights. In a relationship characterized by abuse or violence, the goal of the abuser may be power and control, which stems from the cultural belief that patriarchy and the role of provider entitles men to be dominant over women. However, if the goals of power and control are blocked for the abuser, then they would resort to violence (non-normative means) to achieve those goals. The violence may be physical, such as pushing, shoving, slapping, punching, kicking, and using objects as weapons. The violence may also be psychological or emotional, such as using threats, manipulation, gaslighting, name-calling, put-downs, and creating self-doubt. Finally, the abuse can also be financial (withholding money) or sexual (sexual assault or rape). Often, abusers will resort to multiple forms of violence and abuse to obtain power, control, and submission from their partners (Korkmaz *et al.* 2022). Alternatively, the goals of the victim during abusive interactions may include maintaining the peace, diffusing the situation, and defending oneself and

children. The victim may also resort to violence to achieve these goals, such as physically fighting back by shoving, slapping, scratching, or biting the abuser. Other means for victims in an abusive situation are leaving the location of the abuser, being agreeable and submitting to the abuser's demands, and attempting to reason with the abuser.

Critical to how abusers and victims respond is their access to resources. Resources can play a role in how domestic violence relationships evolve and the meaning attributed to the situation. For instance, a victim with supportive family and friends and one who has access to financial resources may be able to exit an abusive relationship. The victim will have the opportunity to seek help and hopefully recover from the trauma. The victim's self-meaning or self-concept can shift from a helpless victim with depleted self-esteem to a strong survivor. Likewise, suppose an abuser has access to resources, like hiring a private investigator. In that case, they may be able to locate their previous partner, revictimizing them via threats, stalking, and manipulating the victim to return to the relationship.

An abuser may also withhold financial resources from his partner making her more dependent on him and the relationship thereby creating financial strain and eliminating self-sufficiency for the victim (Postmus *et al.* 2012). Hence, this would prevent her from exiting the relationship (Guerin and de Oliveira Ortolan 2017; Peled and Krigel 2016). Indeed, abuse is related to financial strain and economic dependence (Adams *et al.* 2013; Golden, Perreira, and Durrance 2013). Moreover, victims are likely to miss work due to injuries or their partners force them to quit a job. Such tactics can cause a victim to feel the situation is inescapable and hopeless. Abusers try to sever victims from their work and financial resources, including attempts to get the victim fired, ensuring control over their earnings, or spending their money and creating debt. As a result, those who are subjected to abuse can lose their resources over time (Postmus, Plummer, and Stylianou 2016). Unfortunately, exiting an abusive relationship may mean loss of possessions, homes, and employment as many have left for their safety (Wuest *et al.* 2003). Hence, the availability and accessibility to resources undoubtedly shape the interactions within a relationship.

Another critical influence in abuser and victim responses is strain. Goals and blocked means extend beyond specific relationship goals, as many strains can result in spillover or cumulative effects in a relationship.

Strain is inevitable in any relationship as couples try to recognize, satisfy, and discuss the cultural expectations and goals of balancing independence and dependency, intimacy, and commitment. Moreover, as relationships evolve and the number of interactions between the couple increases, there is a greater likelihood of experiencing cumulative, intimate partner strain (Gelles and Straus 1979; Smithey and Straus 2004). Strains are also evident outside of relationships, such as with employment, finances, school, and other responsibilities. Mason and Smithey (2012) find academic expectations to be a major source of strain among college students that contribute to IPV among this population. Specifically, the College Undergraduate Stress Scale (CUSS) (Renner and Mackin 1998) was utilized to measure life stress. Indicators of life stress include failing a test, contracting a sexually transmitted disease (STD), being involved in a physical fight, and being raped. Mason and Smithey (2012), find a positive relationship between life stress and psychological abuse among college student dating couples. In addition, the length of the relationship, which indicates cumulative, intimate partner strain, was a positive predictor of psychological abuse, physical assault, and sexual coercion.

Research must explore stressors specific to and outside the relationship to understand how strains impact relationships. The present model aims to incorporate the specific strains encountered in abusive relationships, accounting for the means and goals of both the abuser (i.e., power and control) and the victim (i.e., peace and diffusion of the situation). This model also includes stressors and strains that are outside of the relationship per se, such as from one's job, that can impact the couple at any point in the relationship, thus potentially intensifying the abuse.

Intergenerational Transmission of Violence Theory

There are various experiences that abusers and victims bring to a relationship, including prior victimization or abuse, witnessing violence, or enduring a perceived failure (e.g., chronic unemployment). An offshoot of social learning theory (SLT), the intergenerational transmission of violence theory (IGT) proposes that experiencing domestic abuse directly or indirectly through witnessing it results in later IPV, especially when experiencing and/or witnessing it as children. Research has long shown support for IGT. Experiencing and/or witnessing abuse increases the likelihood of future perpetration or becoming a victim of abuse (Gover *et al*. 2008; Hamby *et al*. 2012;

Manchikanti Gomez 2011). IGT and SLT argue that children learn more than the violent behaviors of their parents, where children imitate such violence in later relationships. The beliefs, values, and norms that support IPV are also transmitted from role models, in this case, from the parents to the children. Specifically, children learn from significant others, such as parents, how to treat one's future partner (i.e., if a woman is not obeying her partner, he can take matters into his own hands to ensure compliance), or what to expect from one's future partner (i.e., it is acceptable for a man to hit a woman if he is frustrated). Thus, children are socialized to believe that it is acceptable to use violence to solve conflict (Akers and Sellers 2009; Bandura 1973). Moreover, research reveals that children who experience domestic abuse or child abuse are more likely to accept or condone violence against women as adults (Markowitz 2001).

The intergenerational transmission of violence theory (IGT) assists in explaining the link between childhood experiences with abuse and later patterns of behavior and ideologies of adults. While research supports IGT, the results are weak to moderate (Jennings *et al*. 2014; Stith *et al*. 2000), suggesting other factors influence later IPV, such as mental illness (Messing *et al*. 2012). The nuances of other potential factors that link childhood abuse with later abuse in romantic relationships are captured in the DAP model. The DAP model acknowledges mental illness as a characteristic of both the abuser and victim that potentially ignites IPV, but other factors may reduce or even eliminate the risk of IPV, including resources available to both children of domestic abuse and adults who experienced childhood abuse (e.g., counseling), exposure to healthy relationship role models, and learning other ways to deal with stress and conflict outside of the relationship. Although the research findings for IGT are weak to moderate, exposure to child abuse or witnessing IPV of one's parents contributes to the experiences people bring to a relationship. Such experiences and beliefs influence the meanings attributed to the relationship, contribute to a belief system where violence is normalized and used to solve problems and convey how to treat significant others (e.g., it is okay to demean and hit a woman).

DOMESTIC ABUSE AS A PROCESS MODEL

Drawing from the above literature and theoretical perspectives, the DAP model (presented below) was developed to explore how an abusive relationship

evolves across a series of interactions and subsequent outcomes. As shown in Figure **1**, the abuser and victim both possess characteristics, experiences, and resources (aka background antecedents) that influence the entire interaction process. Characteristics include, but are not limited to age, race, ethnicity, gender, income, education, occupation, and physical strength. Experiences include, but are not limited to prior victimization and/or abuse, witnessing violence as a child, and perceived failure, such as job loss. Resources include, but are not limited to social support, counseling, income/financial assistance, community resources (such as domestic violence shelters), and the use of a private investigator. As part of these background antecedents, there are contextual factors with which abusive relationships occur, such as where one lives (urban versus rural), the presence of drugs and alcohol in the relationship, the religious background of the couple (e.g., Muslim and Evangelical Protestants) and mental health issues of both the abuser and victim. The location of the abuse is also a contextual factor to consider. Due to technology, domestic abuse has extended into the virtual world with GPS tracking, account hacking, and online harassment. These antecedents determine a person's perspective and the meanings brought into the initial interaction, as well as influencing their goals (e.g., what they are trying to achieve with the interaction, such as forming a romantic relationship) and the means to achieve those goals. These background antecedents and contextual factors also influence subsequent interactions and the relationship as a whole. The outcome of the initial interaction is expected to be a positive experience as most relationships do not generally begin as abusive.

This positive outcome leads to subsequent interactions that may be positive or negative depending on the evolution of the relationship. Red flags usually present themselves in subsequent interactions. These may be demonstrated early in the relationship and may include excessive calling or texting that makes the victim believe the abuser cares about their well-being and truly "loves" them, convincing the victim that the abuser is the only one that truly cares and encourages them to withdraw from family and friends, and flipping the script by convincing the victim that they are the one at fault for arguments (Guerin and de Oliveira Ortolan 2017). Many of these red flags appear to be subtle/innocuous actions that the victim may either explain away or not recognize as abuse. As the relationship evolves, these interactions intensify into more blatant/vicious abuse (e.g., hitting, shoving, punching, and threats of physical harm/death).

At this stage of the process, the victim may recognize the abuse and faces the decision to stay or exit the relationship. Victims who choose to stay may do so for a number of reasons including, but not limited to, love for the abuser, fear of their abuser, economic dependence, conditioning, and a belief the abuse will stop. Others will choose to exit the relationship, and
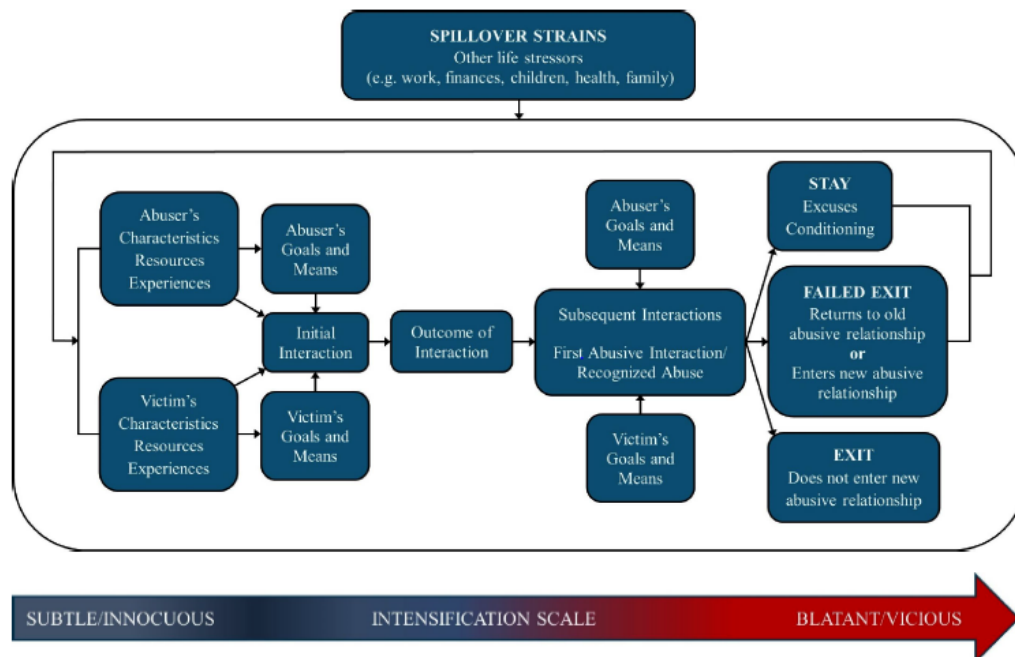

Figure 1: Domestic Abuse Process (DAP) Model.

though some may try to leave, they will not be successful. In the case of a failed exit, the victim either returns to the abuser after some period of time (which can vary from days to years) or enters into an abusive relationship with a new partner. Those who stay or fail to fully exit an abusive relationship repeat the domestic abuse process, thus creating a feedback loop. Finally, some victims successfully exit and break the cycle.

The DAP model also recognizes that these relationships do not occur in a vacuum. Spillover strains are other life stressors that may impact the entire domestic abuse process. These strains include work obligations, financial struggles (e.g., under/unemployment, poverty, and debt), health concerns, and other family responsibilities (e.g., caring for children or elderly parents). For instance, unemployed men who believe their central role is to be the family's provider may draw on the cultural norms of patriarchy to justify their belief that they have ultimate power and control in the relationship. For these men, being unable to provide is viewed as a failure. To overcome this shortcoming, he may turn to violence and abuse to restore his authority and reaffirm his partner's subservient role. Similarly, domestic abuse tends to escalate when women are the single or primary breadwinners in the relationship due to the perceived threat to his masculinity (Atkinson, Greenstein, and Lang 2005; Zhang, Yinjunjie, and Breunig 2023).

DISCUSSION

The DAP model is unique in that it draws from three theoretical perspectives that allow the inclusion of meaning and interactions over time, emphasizing the notion that domestic violence and abuse occur over time and evolve as the relationship progresses. The impact of stressors and strains both within and outside of the relationship is vital to a process model like the DAP, which emphasizes the evolution, escalation, and intensity of such relationships. Another strength of the DAP model is the inclusion of a feedback loop as relationships occur daily and across a multitude of interactions. For instance, the DAP model takes into consideration that if the victim decides to remain in the relationship, they face more abusive events and outcomes. However, if the victim exits the relationship, they may enter a different abusive relationship, return to the abuser, or not enter another abusive relationship. While the DAP model draws on the tenets of social learning theory to explain how such relationships transpire, the model does not fully explain why some

victims stay in relationships, or why others exit and become survivors. The concept of "doing gender" may shed light on these different outcomes. Individuals continually engage in "doing gender" that may either reaffirm or challenge gender norms and stereotypes in all interactions. A female victim may challenge gender norms of being submissive and leave an abusive partner.

Abusive relationships evolve as the couple spends more time with each other, presenting more opportunities for abusive interactions and encountering more strains both within and outside of the relationship. The FVEPM, which succinctly outlines how an event forms, describes antecedent factors and what occurs after the event (forgiving the abuser or exiting the relationship), does not examine the abusive relationship as an evolving process and neglects the strains couples face and the abuser's and victim's responses to such strains. The DAP model emphasizes the importance of goals and the means to achieve those goals within and outside of the relationship. FVEPM does not examine how domestic abuse evolves, potentially yielding several interactions that increase in frequency and intensity and more potential injury over time.

To test the proposed model, a survey instrument and follow-up interviews would be needed. The questions on the survey should address the following items: How the couple met, what was happening in their separate lives at the time (e.g., employment, friendships and other relationships, and hobbies), how the relationship progressed, the couple's interactions and communication exchanges, when the abuse began and its form(s) (e.g., negative comments, hitting, questioning whereabouts, using GPS tracking, online stalking, and hacking accounts), the goals of each person when the abuse began and the means used to try to achieve those goals, as well as how the abuse was ended/disrupted (for those who ended the relationship) or how the relationship was sustained (for those who stayed).

For the abusers, in addition to the above questions, survey items would include whether they have continued their behaviors or somehow changed their interaction with a significant other, and if their behavior has changed, how and why it has changed. After administering the survey instrument, follow-up interviews with respondents to obtain more details and content about the relationship would be scheduled.

The sample for the study would consist of domestic abuse victims and abusers. The victims in the sample would be those who have remained in the relationship (stayers), those who have ended the relationship (leavers), and those who have entered a new abusive relationship (repeaters). Abusers included in the sample would be those who have persisted in abuse (persisters), those who have discontinued their abuse (desisters), and those who did not initially engage in abuse but started abusive behavior after a prolonged period of being in the relationship (delayers) (Adhia *et al*. 2020). Ideally, the sample would consist of respondents from a variety of backgrounds, including sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, age, sex, religion, number of children, sexual orientation), economic characteristics (e.g., employment status, occupation, income, and education), relationship type (e.g., uncoupled, dating, cohabiting, marital, and nontraditional), and relationship duration (e.g., under one year to several years).

To address ethical concerns, respondents indicating they are in a current abusive relationship will be provided with resources, including the contact information of therapists, shelter information, and the National Domestic Violence Hotline number. This study is required to be approved by an Institutional Review Board before obtaining participants and collecting data. This process will ensure that the study is ethically sound and that respondents' rights and well-being are protected.

Analyses would involve both quantitative and qualitative techniques. The survey item responses would be coded in such a way that quantitative software (such as SPSS) could analyze the data. Structural equation modeling will be used to uncover moderating and mediating effects between factors. Qualitative software (such as Nvivo) will be used to discover themes and uncover patterns of associations between factors.

LIMITATIONS

The DAP model does have its drawbacks. First, the DAP model is more victim-oriented regarding their decision to stay or exit the relationship. The decision of the abuser is not examined, such as deciding to move on to another potential victim if their partner decides to exit the relationship or seek treatment. Including and measuring outcomes for the abuser is also important to understanding the processual dynamic of abusive relationships and acquiring the knowledge to break the cycle of domestic violence.

The DAP model also does not explicitly address emotional components, including disappointment, fear, and anger. Agnew's (1992) general strain theory (GST) could be incorporated alongside Merton's strain theory to fully expand on the process and dynamics of an abusive relationship. GST recognizes that there are several sources of strain including (1) failure to achieve one's goals; (2) removal of positive stimuli; and/or (3) presentation of negative stimuli. In the context of an abusive relationship, strain may occur with any of these conditions. For instance, an abuser may experience strain and subsequent anger if he is prevented from obtaining a valued goal, such as control and power. An abuser may also feel strain if his victim threatens to leave the relationship, which is removing a positive stimulus. Finally, an abuser may feel strain if his victim presents negative stimuli, such as threatening to call the police or fighting back.

A final limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design which involves retrospective information about the relationship. Recalling relationship trauma may not be accurate because of suppressed memories, or just faulty recollections in general especially when remembering temporarily distant events and interactions. Moreover, cross-sectional studies only capture data from one time point, thus precluding temporality and causality of events. To overcome these drawbacks, this study intends to ask several questions regarding the evolution of the relationship, from victim and abuser backgrounds, the first interaction, subsequent interactions, and the present outcome, where the victim foresees the relationship direction, and the final outcome. The data will include as much vital information as possible. Moreover, a longitudinal study was considered. However, they are time and resource intensive and also run the risk of attrition or losing respondents from a sample over time. This is a concern when collecting data from a vulnerable population like survivors, victims, and abusers. For instance, a victim who initially agreed to participate in the study may choose to no longer participate if they happen to return to the abuser. Additionally, attrition can occur if the abuser happens to be imprisoned during the next data collection point (Hattery and Smith 2020).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Domestic abuse is a complex issue, requiring a multidimensional holistic response. Victims need access to financial and social resources, so they do not need to rely on an abusive or potentially abusive

partner for survival. They not only need to recognize the warning signs of impending abuse, but they also need assistance in developing new norms, content, and understandings of interactions that will steer them away from revictimization (Murphy, Rosenbaum, and Hamberger 2022). Moreover, offenders need to be made aware of how their belief systems have contributed to their abusive behavior (Wallach and Sela 2008).

To prevent future victimizations, programs that increase public awareness about domestic abuse should be made more prominent. Since many early romantic relationships may involve abusive and violent behaviors, youth should be exposed to curriculum and other events that highlight the warning signs of domestic abuse and appropriate ways of dealing with it. Ideally, this exposure should occur before youths become involved in romantic relationships, perhaps as early as middle school. Studies comparing youth who have had exposure to this kind of programming to those without exposure reveal that exposed students are less accepting of abusive behaviors (O'Leary and Slep 2012).

The purpose of the DAP model is to understand the domestic abuse process. The knowledge gleaned from testing the model can be used to develop strategies and implement programs, such as educational programs for youth to better recognize abusive behaviors and how to avoid such interactions. Moreover, the findings can be disseminated via workshops, online reports, and other training programs for practitioners to inform their work with those clients involved in domestic abuse relationships. Additionally, public policy influencers could use the information to develop and implement programs to break the cycle of violence.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to introduce a process model (DAP) that conceptualizes domestic violence as a pattern of interactions that evolve into abuse with growing escalation and intensification over time. The DAP model is unique as it incorporates the background characteristics of both the abuser and the victim, their previous experience with trauma and abuse, resources available, the goals of both the abuser and the victim, the means to achieve those goals, the outcome of the first interaction, and the outcomes of subsequent interactions (including the decision of the victim to either stay or exit the

relationship). A relationship characterized by domestic abuse generally contains complex dynamics of power and control that abusers do not necessarily reveal in the beginning, or the signs (red flags) are subtle and ignored by victims. Meanings and expectations based on background characteristics and experiences of both parties are brought into the couple's interactions within the relationship. The DAP model recognizes that interactions yield outcomes that influence later interactions, and the model includes both the abuser and the victim. Despite these strengths, the decision to continue in an abusive relationship emphasizes the victim's choices as opposed to the abuser's choices. While it may be up to the victim to exit an abusive relationship, what does this mean for the abuser? This aspect will need to be considered in the future. This paper also highlights how the authors will test the proposed DAP model and how such a model can assist in prevention and intervention efforts by teaching young adults, victims, and survivors the process and evolving nature of domestic abuse.

FUNDING

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

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