Feminism and its impacts on the domestic violence industry

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This essay will explore the history and effectiveness of a domestic violence industry influenced by feminist theory; and compare it with the benefits of a conflict theory model. It will examine how conflict theory can encourage deeper discussions regarding the driving forces behind DV and expand on the feminist theory's singular focus of male culpability. Domestic violence (DV) as an issue is one that many people in society have either heard about or witnessed, their exposure to this social concern can come from a variety of sources including personal experience, social connections or through the media. DV continues to hold relevance in modern society, with governments around the world throwing millions of dollars at the problem each year. The Australian Government alone will support this industry to the tune of $1.73 billion between 2015 and 2020 (Brandis 2017 p.28). By changing the theoretical lens from feminist theory to conflict theory a more equitable, solutions based and frugal support system may be established.

Feminist theory remains the dominant driving force behind the domestic violence industry in western society (Houston 2014 p,217). The recognition of DV as a social issue has evolved over the past 40 years, moving from the privacy of the family home and into the public sphere (Rizza 2009 p.127). Theorists recognise that this progress has been due to the accomplishments of feminism (Houston 2014 p.219). With feminist theory at the forefront of the effort to criminalize domestic violence within the home, the feminist movement was also successful in simultaneously framing DV as a patriarchal force (Houston 2014 p.221). Through the lens of feminist theory, they identified male domination as the primary source of domestic violence (Houston 2014 p,217); a claim which effectively enabled them to reject other influencing factors to DV such as gender (female), culture, social class, stress (financial and emotional) and substance abuse (Mitchell 2011 p.6, Haselschwerdt,

Hardesty & Hans 2011 p.1696). Under the auspices of feminism, the 1970's ushered in the first of the battered women's shelters, these refuges offering a haven for women and children who were being abused within their personal relationships (Rizza 2009 p.127). It was not long after these were established that shelter volunteers noticed women were routinely returning to their abusive partners (Rizza 2009 p.127). In response to this phenomenon, there emerged the earliest batterer intervention programs based on the feminist theory that "men need to control women" (Rizza 2009 p.127). In 1981, the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (DAIP) created a structured approach to the treatment of violent men, this was christened the Duluth Model, after its place of origin in Duluth, Minnesota (Rizza 2009 p.127). The Duluth Model would become the most commonly used intervention for domestic violence in the western world (Sanow 2003 p.4), and would push back at the patriarchy with its psychoeducational feminist approach (Rizza 2009 p.127). The overarching theme of the Duluth Model is to ensure the safety of female victims by holding the male offenders accountable through community intervention (Rizza 2009 p.128). The Duluth Model, was designed to teach men to confront their attitudes to power and control, but has resulted in little reduction to re-offending rates, and in some cases, increased the likelihood of violence in the home (Sanow 2003 p.4).

The White Ribbon Campaign has become the most prevalent organisation to address violence against women in Australia (Seymour 2017 p.1). The campaign was originally created in response to the 1989 shooting of 14 women in Canada, but has received incredible support since its introduction in Australia (Seymour 2017 p.1). Working off feminist theory, White Ribbon Australia (WRA) encourages the substitution of "attitudes and behaviours" for "power and gender inequality" as the driving factors behind domestic violence (Seymour 2017 p.4). WRA advocates that violence towards women is a result of preconditioned gender inequality and as such, is the result of something that men 'choose to use' to control women (Seymour 2017 p.5, Houston 2014 p.245). Indeed, WRA Chief Executive Officer Libby Davies has publicly stated "We stop violence at the source, and the source is men" (Davies 2016). WRA utilises community engagement particularly well in its approach to

domestic violence fundraising and focusses its attention on the middle and upper classes of society in typical bourgeois fashion, this approach could also be described as "too white and too polite" (Seymour 2017 p.9). In terms of WRA funding expenditure, it is interesting to note that of the $7.5 million it received in revenue between 2015 and 2016 only $400,000 could be linked to either domestic violence awareness marketing or other projects, the remainder of funds being absorbed back into the company as wages, travel, general business and fundraising expenses (White Ribbon 2016 p.38). The arbitration inherently contained within conflict theory would influence frugality around this spending and encourage a broader range of interventions. Feminist theory also argues that female victimhood can be explained by a woman's judgement being clouded by fear and that women are socially pressured to believe wifehood is their greatest calling (Houston 2014 p.244). Feminists theorists believe that even a financially independent woman may stay with an abusive partner due to inherent sexism (Houston 2014 p.244). Under a feminist framework, women who abuse their husbands are excused for their behaviour through "victim blaming" (Houston 2014 p.246) and the reasons attributed to female abuse are self-protection and protection of their children (Tyson, Kirkwood and McKenzie 2016 P.561). The credibility of this feminist theory statement begins to break down under scrutiny due to the exclusion of too much conflicting information. Conflict theory would allow us to explore two highly conspicuous and specific arguments that could cast doubt on the feminist theory claim of exclusive male aggression in domestic relationships.

Conflict theory requires room for competition to truly flourish (Hungerford 2008 p.29), whereas feminist theory, when applied to DV, can sterilise the benefits of conflict theory by restricting focus to one area of inequality at the detriment of all others. Feminist theory, after all, intends to place all blame at the feet of patriarchal force (Houston p.221). This monopoly over the DV industry by a totalitarian feminist theory, restricts the societal progress and interventions that theorists predict would naturally develop under a conflict model. The first argument to consider when reviewing the authenticity of exclusive male responsibility for DV is the prevalence of physical assaults in same sex

relationships. A survey of gay and lesbian relationships revealed that gay males were only victims in 25% of studied cases, yet the prevalence of violence in lesbian relationships was reported at a much higher rate of 56% (Magruder, Waldner-Haugrud & Vaden Gratch 1997 p.175). The lack of male involvement in violent lesbian relationships indicate that patriarchy and masculinity may not be as significant an influence on family violence as feminist theorists predicted. The second argument that casts doubt on the feminist theory approach is the greater number of filicide deaths attributed to female perpetrators. The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) crediting 52% of all filicides to female perpetrators over the 2005 – 2015-year period (Australian Institute of Criminology 2015 p.2). The AIC data confirms that females are quite capable of committing violent acts against other helpless family members without the curse of patriarchal domination. Although feminist theory is the overarching contributor to the awareness and intervention of DV, it is important to note that it still utilises conflict theory to maintain its influence over the narrative. The DV industry itself has taken on the role of the bourgeois and relegated an entire male population to the role of the proletarian, effectively removing all resources and supports from male victims using government policy, media and resource distribution to maintain the status quo (Hoff 2012 p.156). In reviewing the Domestic and Family Violence Budget 2016-2017 (NSW Health 2016), all available monies have been directed toward the practical support of women and children at the exclusion of men, including housing options, victim counselling and legal assistance (NSW Ministry of Health 2016). This disproportionate allocation of funding is extremely concerning given that extensive research into family and domestic violence that has identified; even as early as 2013, that women are as physically aggressive, (if not more so) than men within relationships (Feibert 2013 p.405). The severity of violence by female aggressors was also found to be comparable to that of male aggressors, including acts such as kicking, choking and weapon assaults (Straus 2009 p.553). Straus has gone on to identify the originating causes for violence by women as almost identical as those identified for men, including coercion, anger and punishment (Straus 2009 p.555). On a positive

note, the feminist theory approach has seen a steady drop in intimate partner violence by men towards women, even if it has been at the expense of male victims (Hoff 2012 p.156).

When conflict theory is applied to domestic violence without a lens of feminist theory, it becomes quite apparent that there are more complex issues involved with intimate partner violence. Issues such as race, social status, gender, alcohol and substance abuse all come into focus as contributing factors. When feminist theory is removed, the spotlight can be turned onto the prevalence of domestic violence in Aboriginal communities, allowing focus on one of Australia's most vulnerable peoples. The NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research data reveals that the rates of domestic violence for Aboriginal woman is six times higher than non-indigenous women, and that Aboriginal males had reporting rates of four times that of their non-indigenous counterparts (Mitchell 2011 p.13). The rates of hospitalisation from intimate partner violence was also astronomically higher for Aboriginal Australians than their non-indigenous equivalents, with males requiring medical attention at 27 times the rate of other males and females experiencing hospitalisation at 38 times that of other females (Mitchell 2011 p.14). Class too can be freely assessed without the constraints of feminist theory, and when unimpeded; reveals ample empirical evidence to actively demonstrate a clear and precise connection between socio economics and domestic violence (Evans 2005 p.38). By manipulating and removing class definitions and applying 'universal risk theory' where all women are at risk of domestic violence, gender feminist theory effectively renders all class issues impotent. (Evans p.38). Research undertaken independently of feminism indicates that poverty is the greatest contributing factor for all victims of intimate relationship violence, with women from low income homes being at significantly higher risk of serious injury, this research also cites that the rates of intimate partner violence are 9 times higher for those in lower socio economic neighbourhoods (Evans 2005 p.39). The introduction of these research results into the current narrative of gendered violence would very likely dilute the blame attributed to men and raise unwanted questions on the validity of feminist theory. As previously discussed, the rates of DV perpetration by both sexes have been found to be almost identical, both in frequency and severity (Feibert 2013 p.405). The media in

Australia often repeats the statistic of 1 woman every 6 days being killed by an intimate partner, although we very rarely hear the rest of this statistic which identifies that 1 man every 10 days is also being killed under the same circumstances (Australian Institute of Criminology 2015 p.3). Australian men effectively making up 25% of the homicide victim numbers of intimate partner violence (Australian Institute of Criminology 2015 p.3). This statistic, when taken singularly and without the context provided by other contributing factors, can provide an imbalanced representation of DV victim numbers and encourage the reinforcement of the feminist theory narrative. One last contributing factor to domestic violence worth discussing is the consumption of alcohol. The Australian Bureau of Statistics found that between 2001 and 2010, 44% of intimate partner homicides were alcohol related, and the percentage of alcohol related domestic assaults were as high as 62%. Alcohol was also found to be a contributing factor in 87% of Aboriginal intimate partner deaths. These previously disregarded statistics provide conflict theorists an encouraging reason to consider family violence without the distortion of a feminist theory lens.

Upon reviewing the information provided in this essay, the DV industry in western society has clearly flourished over the last 40 years under feminist theory; the victims that it represents being provided with a plethora of assistance options, including financial and legal aid, housing and social supports. The evidence also concludes that despite having the cards stacked predominantly in their favour, the rates of domestic violence perpetration towards women and children has barely shifted. Feminist theory, despite its good intentions has failed to adequately address this problem in society. By removing the gendered lens, the likelihood of identifying a broader range of contributing factors greatly increases, allowing for the implementation of a more varied approach in concerns to domestic violence. Research would indicate that the claim of patriarchy as the dominant contributor to domestic violence does not hold up to scrutiny once feminist theory has been removed from the equation. This can be clearly demonstrated with lesbian and parental abuse statistics. By disregarding the other major contributors to family violence, such as race, class, substance abuse and gender, the efforts required to save victims have been hamstringed by feminist theory ideology.

Conflict theory when applied freely to the DV industry has the potential to cultivate individual solutions and greatly improve the lives of all victims. This monopoly over the DV industry by a totalitarian feminist theory restricts societal progress and interventions that theorists predict would develop naturally under a conflict theory model.

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