

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### *Conclusions*

In this chapter, I discuss the findings from Chapter 4, by weaving in the two theoretical frameworks of phenomenology and feminist critical theory. Three conclusions are drawn based on the findings of 37 women's experience of rage towards their intimate partners

1. Rage is a distinct experience from anger.
2. Unresolved pain from the past manifests as rage in the present.
3. Women's social location, experiences of rage, and involvement within the criminal justice system are interconnected.

These conclusions are guided by my original research questions, in addition to the six coding families (see Appendix G) that were used to analyze these data. Table 5.1 reflects the relationship between the research questions, the major coding families, and the conclusions:

Table 5.1

Development of Conclusions

Research Questions	Coding Families	Conclusions
1. What is essential to a woman's experience for her to describe it as "rage"? 2. What are the meanings that a woman would give to explain her rage?	<b>100</b> How I recognize I'm feeling rage and not anger	1. Rage is a distinct experience from anger
3. How does the expressed rage relate to her intimate partner?	<b>200</b> Past factors that helped shape rage <b>300</b> Things that can cause me to feel rage now as an adult <b>400</b> Rage expressed towards partners	2. Pain from the past manifests as rage in the present
4. How do factors such as race, class, and gender, affect a woman's rage?	<b>500</b> Perceptions of how race, class, and gender impact rage	3. Women's social location, experiences of rage, and involvement within the criminal justice system are interconnected.
5. How does rage link to the woman's experience of being involved in the criminal justice system?	<b>600</b> How women's rage relates to the criminal justice system	

Because the frameworks of phenomenology and feminist critical theory each require distinct foci of analysis, when combined, the inherent tensions produce a fruitful analysis. In order to effectively use both frameworks, I employ a phenomenological analysis to discuss the experiential essence of rage, while implementing an analysis of feminist critical theory to discuss the larger social structures that incubate such phenomena. By the end of my discussion, these combined frameworks provide an encompassing understanding of the women currently involved in the criminal justice system who have experienced rage towards their intimate partners.

The challenges I faced in analyzing these findings were reflective of the contrasting observing lenses required for each theoretical perspective. For example, the premise of phenomenology is to assume a detached position of observation, where beliefs and convictions are momentarily suspended, in order to capture the "essence" of a particular phenomenon (Moran, 2000). To do so, the researcher explores the descriptions and meanings given by those

who experience this phenomenon. As a result, the full experience of something becomes exposed. This approach, however, essentially isolates the phenomenon that occurs, without considering the influence of larger systems impacting the phenomenon.

Feminist critical theory, on the other hand, is based upon critiquing and challenging the social structures that induce a particular phenomenon to occur (Marshall, 1988). This approach fights against using a single, simplistic reduction in order to provide explanations, and instead seeks to reveal hidden complexities and caveats. It demands that the whole context of an experience be considered, refusing to suggest a phenomenon occurs within a vacuum. Feminist critical theory goes beyond description—it illuminates the social and political systems that create forces of oppression, which consequently, may directly link to the phenomenon studied (Renzetti & Goodstein, 2001).

Each framework provides necessary and useful perspectives. Without the use of both in this study, the discussion would not fully reflect the complexities of women within the criminal justice system and their experience of rage towards their intimate partners. The combination of these divergent theoretical vantage points addresses both the micro and macro perspectives.

#### *Rage is a Distinct Experience from Anger*

As a result of these data, I propose that the essence of rage, when experienced towards an intimate partner, is a distinct experience from anger. This conclusion is based upon the phenomenological approach, which carefully considers multiple angles of an experience and uses evidence provided from disclosures and descriptions (Sokolowski, 2000). The essence of rage, based upon the results of 37 women's experience of rage towards their partners, encapsulates an experience of being out of control, accompanied by distinct emotional and physiological changes.

To effectively use this approach, however, Sokolowski explains the need to distinguish between one's natural attitude and one's phenomenological attitude. One's natural attitude involves beliefs for things accepted within the world, which serve to guide one's judgments and perceptions. Once one's natural attitude is identified, it needs to be suspended or "epoched," in order to effectively implement a phenomenological attitude.

The phenomenological attitude, on the other hand, disengages from those initially held beliefs and viewpoints. From the role of a detached observer, the natural attitudes are then reflected upon. These beliefs are not discarded, but rather become neutralized, so that the phenomenon can be contemplated without prejudgments. The resulting knowledge is thereby derived from what is examined and described.

To implement this approach, I had to remain cognizant of my natural attitudes that would guide my exploration. This included attitudes I held about rage prior to any interactions I had with my incarcerated participants. My initial understanding of the experience of rage was that it was simply an intensified form of anger. It was not difficult to epoch this belief, as I have had little to inform it—although I have felt extreme anger at times towards an intimate partner, I have not experienced what I envisioned rage to embody. This approach required that I closely listen to the descriptions women provided for what the experience of rage was like for them.

Nearly all of the participants described a clear demarcation between the experience of anger and the experience of rage. Anger was repeatedly explained as a manageable emotion; participants described themselves feeling in control and able to easily access their logic and reason. Rage, however, represented an overwhelming experience that takes control of a person's emotions and actions; this force was attributed to violent actions that are consequently taken, as reason and logic are rendered ineffective.

All of the participants discussed various physiological changes that occurred during their episodes of rage. These changes ranged from increased heart rates, to shaking and trembling within their bodies, to having blurred vision, to the intensity of blanking out entirely. Some women even described having bodily “warning signals,” which they had wanted others to heed, in order to escape their rage that was soon to follow.

Upon completion of the interviews, as I repeatedly read the transcripts to develop coding categories, it became clear that rage was an experience that had emotional precursors. It is not an experience that is isolated from other emotions; rather, women repeatedly described a series of emotions that led up to their experience of rage. Therefore, my first conclusion is that the primary essence of rage involves this emotional process: (a) initial feelings of fear and feeling threatened; (b) followed by a brief period of tears; and (c) culminating into an experience of feeling out of control, both emotionally and physically. Taking into account all the participants’ descriptions, this process most commonly portrays a woman’s experience of rage. Women who characterize differing experiences of rage generally identified the same emotions, but in a different order.

#### *Pain from the Past Manifests as Rage in the Present*

In addition to using the frameworks of phenomenology and critical feminist theory, an interpersonal perspective is useful for providing a more encompassing understanding of the essence of rage women have towards their intimate partners. Object relations theory (Scharff & Scharff, 1987; Slipp, 1984) explains how the concept of one’s self and one’s identity are created and maintained through the relationships from both past and present; current adult relationships reflect experiences with primary caregivers. This perspective helps to uncover the emotional context that underlies an experience of rage, while also revealing the magnitude of unhealed

emotional wounds from past primary relationships. Those early wounds, which transform into feelings of shame, can manifest in varying degrees, with the most severe degree of shame manifested in expressions of rage. Based upon my findings, I therefore conclude that unresolved pain from the past manifests as rage in the present.

*Shame-filled childhood memories.* The majority of participants recalled various childhood experiences they associated with rage. Some women, however, were unable to isolate a particular memory of rage, thus leading to the sharing of multiple recollections of deep pain and suffering. The most overwhelmingly repeated experiences that evoked rage during childhood involved various forms of abuse, as well as experiences of abandonment.

Common to all stories shared was a description of shame, although not specifically labeled as such. Because the word was not used during the interviews, it consequently was not included in the coding. Despite the omission of the word shame, other depictions of shame were evident. For example, Potter-Effron and Potter-Effron (1989) and Scheff and Retzinger (1991) both describe the various portrayals of shame, including physical responses (such as looking down or away from someone), actions (such as hiding oneself or withdrawing), as well as painful internal thoughts (such as, "I am worthless"). Individuals are typically unaware of their emotional state of shame, though these observations are common signals to indicate this underlying emotion.

Scheff and Retzinger (1991) assign shame as the master emotion, which is often masked by other feelings. As a result of shame being felt in varying degrees, people commonly misinterpret this emotion, and sometimes, fail to recognize it altogether. For example, mild forms of shame may be felt and identified as social awkwardness and discomfort, whereas feelings such as mortification and humiliation would reflect more extreme feelings of shame.

Experiences of abuse and neglect, which were reflected in the participants' early memories of rage, often lead to identities that are shame-based (Potter-Effron & Potter-Effron, 1989). Retzinger (1991) argues that any reference to the self in relation to another person, where the self feels negatively evaluated, results in feeling shame. For example, when children suffer these various forms of victimization, an inner sense of defectiveness, unworthiness, and self-hatred generally results. These thoughts and feelings translate into an internal world of shame.

It is crucial, therefore, to understand the interconnection between shame and rage. When an individual feels threatened that their shame will be exposed, actions of rage often result. Some argue that acts of rage help to divert attention away from a person's hidden sense of inadequacy (Potter-Effron & Potter-Effron, 1989). The survival strategy of attacking another person to preserve one's own fragile identity serves to defend against an overwhelming sense of shame. Consequently, the result of breaking connection with another during an episode of rage only intensifies the shame a person already feels.

Certain words and cues offer insight into individuals that contend with feelings of shame. Retzinger (1991), who links shame with rage, discusses numerous words and signals that are used in replacement of shame. "Words such as 'resentful,' 'bitter,' 'spiteful,' or 'holding a grudge,' usually involve shame-rage compounds" (p. 69). These words reflect common descriptions used when women described their feelings of past memories, particularly involving memories of early caretakers who demonstrated rage towards them.

Additional paralinguistic and visual signals that demonstrate shame accompanied the participants' recollections of rage. The most frequent paralinguistic cues included hesitations, pauses, rapid speech, lax articulation, breathiness, and fragmented speech. Other commonly displayed behaviors that were observed in the women's descriptions of rage included averting

their eyes, licking their lips, wrinkling their forehead, and fidgeting. Retzinger explains that the more cues a person exhibits, the more intense the shame a person feels.

According to object relations theory (Kernberg, 1976), individuals will continue seeking out a “good object” to satisfy the unmet needs from early childhood years. It was unsurprising, then, to learn that the majority of these women described having adult partners who replicated similar forms of emotional pain and abuse from their caretakers. For instance, participants disclosed repeated examples of physical, mental, and emotional degradation by their adult partners. These examples often were described as *triggers* for women experiencing rage. Theoretically, it can be argued that these partners are unconsciously familiar to the women’s perpetrator of pain, as they seek a satisfying outcome from what failed to occur within the original attachment relationship.

*Reliving the trauma.* What became significant was listening to more than half of the participants describe episodes of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), though unlabeled, as they recounted reliving intense painful moments from the past once their rage was triggered in the present. Women who described seeing the faces of former abusers as they looked at their current partners magnified this even further. What these data reveal is that many women who express rage towards their intimate partners appear to be expressing rage towards someone from the past who similarly inflicted deep wounds.

Literature focusing on the intersection of violence, domestic violence, and PTSD supports the possibility that women expressing rage towards their partners may be driven by experiences with a significant past figure. After reviewing relevant literature, there appears to be a strong connection between trauma, violent behavior, and substance abuse (Dunnegan, 1997). Findings suggest that shame serves as a powerful channel for rage.

Although studies have been completed that focus on expressions of anger, as opposed to rage, and its connection to PTSD, findings may illuminate facets of rage. Riggs, Dancu, Gershuny, Greenberg, and Foa (1992) conducted a longitudinal study that examined anger and PTSD among 116 women who were victims of various assaults. A high correlation was discovered between the women's level of anger and hostility and the degree the women suffered from PTSD. Another similar study by Feeny, Zoellner, and Foa (2000) examined the relationship between symptoms of anger and PTSD among women who were victims of assault. Findings suggested that at four weeks post assault, the level of anger served as a predictor for the severity of later PTSD.

*The relational dynamics leading to rage.* What has been discussed so far reveals the internal experiences of women who have rage towards their intimate partners. This is useful for further understanding the escalation of conflict that occurs between couples. Based upon Retzinger's (1991) research that analyzed both the emotional processes and conflict escalation between intimate partners, feelings of shame and alienation precede relational conflict prior to violent escalation. Shame, which has been described as the core of rage, consequently occurs between partners when social bonds feel threatened and individuals fear alienation. The root of destructive conflict between partners results from the intertwinement of shame and alienation.

Scheff and Retzinger (1991) describe how the emotional complexities within this type of interpersonal conflict are often misunderstood. For example, when shame is felt but ignored, anger will generally follow. Anger serves the dual purpose of protecting one's self from getting hurt, as well as attempting to repair the damaged bond. If the partner who is feeling shame fails to acknowledge it, the other partner is often viewed as the cause of hostility. Anger transforms into rage and violent conflict between partners once the combination of shame and alienation

occurs. Therefore, violence is likely between couples when they are unable to successfully negotiate conflict due to insecure bonds and covert emotions of shame and alienation.

When considering the emotional process of rage described by the participants of this study, the initial feelings of fear and feeling threatened may actually involve more than just fearing bodily harm. Rather, it may also reflect fearing alienation, based on emotional separation and abandonment, as the social bonds with the woman's partner feel threatened. It could be that the tears women describe prior to feeling rage are the feelings of shame and alienation that are emotionally erupting inside. As shame is ignored between these couples and attacks and defenses ensue, the combination of shame and alienation may then trigger escalation to rage and episodes of violence.

Therefore, based upon these data findings, my second conclusion is that the pain from the past manifests itself as rage in the present. The violence that these women perpetrated towards their partners during acts of rage seems to be fueled by past experiences of shame and alienation. The explosion of rage is a violent culmination of the past intersecting with the present.

#### *Interconnecting Links between Social Location, Rage, and the Criminal Justice System*

The impending consequences to acts of rage, whether indirectly or directly, generally result in women's involvement with the criminal justice system. On the surface, prison represents punishment for acts of wrongdoing. Beneath the surface, however, one sees that prison also represents home to many individuals who experience multiple disadvantages from societal oppression. "The prisons of our country have become vast warehouses for the poor and unemployed, for low-wage workers and the poorly educated" and most especially, for minorities (Marable, 2001, p. 128). Marilyn Frye (2001) offers a poignant analogy by utilizing a birdcage. She begins her description offering a partial focus that limits the viewer's perspective to a mere

glimpse of wire that a bird is perched upon. The viewer continues to observe the bird, which appears eager to fly, as it hops from one end of the wire to the other. Yet, it does not leave. Using this lens, the observer remains perplexed as why the bird does not simply spread its wings and fly away. However, once the lenses are changed to allow a perspective with greater distance, a much larger depiction of the bird's surroundings is witnessed. It becomes obvious that the bird is unable to fly away due to the cage that encases it. This analogy is used to highlight the same phenomena of those who experience oppression within society—unable to leave the cage and fly away because of entrapping social structures and internalized forces.

This illustration may help shed light on some of the participants' seeming lack of awareness regarding issues of marginalization and oppression. It seems significant that many participants denied their feelings of rage as being connected to factors such as race, class, or gender. It could be argued that similar to the restricted mobility that these inmates are accustomed to living, there may also be restricted or limited understanding of how macro contextual issues intersect within the micro level of their lives. It may reflect the viewer who only saw the bird perched on a wire; the puzzlement of why the bird would not leave was soon made clear once the viewer was able to see the bird in its full context, observing the cage that surrounds it.

*Criminal justice system.* As discussed at the beginning of this study, the drastic increase in women's incarceration rates poses great concern. The 313% growth rate of the female prison population from 1980 to 1993 necessitates a closer examination to help explain this trend (National Women's Law Center, 1994). Although for the first time there was a very slight decrease (less than 1%) from 2000 to 2001 in women's incarceration rates (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001), it still remains necessary to uncover the issues fueling this trend. When

specifically focusing on intimate violence, there were 98,850 violent crimes committed by women towards male partners during 2000. Although this only accounts for 3% of the overall violent crimes committed by both men and women that year, those numbers are still quite significant.

Statistics are meaningless, however, without understanding the insidious role that drugs have had in this criminal justice portrait. The crime patterns in 1995 suggest that the leading offenses for women included minor property-related crimes, which include acts of larceny-theft (such as shoplifting), fraud (often related to credit cards or welfare), forgery (such as writing bad checks), and embezzlement (other types of monetary scams), as well as prostitution, and drug-related offenses (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995). Although these charges are documented as separate crimes, drugs often cause these crimes to interlink. For example, women who commit acts of burglary, larceny, and prostitution often do so in support of their drug habits (Anglin, Hser, McGlothin, 1987; Hser, Chou, & Anglin, 1990). Commonly associated with these women are addicted males, who frequently use these women as accomplices in committing such crimes to further support their own drug habits (Steffensmeier & Terry, 1986).

*Placing drug-offenses in context.* Whether indirectly or directly, drugs account for why many women are currently imprisoned. For instance, half of incarcerated women from 277 prisons had reported being under the influence of drugs or alcohol while committing their criminal offense (The Bureau of Justice, 1994). From a national perspective, one in three women inmates was serving a sentence for drug offenses, which accounted for 55% of the increase of incarcerated women from 1986 to 1991. The Bureau of Prisons reports that 64% of women who have been incarcerated are charged with drug-related offenses (Klein, 1993). As the rate of males arrested for drug abuse violations has nearly stayed the same from 1999 to 2000, the rate of

women arrested for drug abuse violations has slightly increased (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001).

In order to better understand women who are likely to be incarcerated for drug-related offenses, it is necessary to consider the societal cultivation of such experiences, particularly since women have been historically more likely to be incarcerated for drugs than men (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995). The lens of patriarchy illuminates the unequal distribution of power between men and women in society, which, consequently, affords women fewer opportunities (Johnson, 2001; Owen, 2001). Wilson (1996) discusses the possible environmental influences that encourage women to engage in a lifestyle that involves crime and drugs. Factors such as poor socioeconomic conditions, substandard education and employment training, coupled with the added financial pressures of raising a family as a single parent may convince some women that entering this way of life is the most practical decision. This decision, however, results from the effects of patriarchal oppression, in which women's lives and opportunities are devalued.

These incarceration rates, therefore, are most reflective of women's struggle to survive in a world where options are limited. Challenges presented by the participants' social location were highlighted throughout the interviews; crimes reflected both feelings and measures of desperation, in attempts to overcome disadvantages faced. Drug use, for instance, was central to all of the participants from this study, as the sample was drawn from a substance-abuse recovery unit. Half of the 37 women interviewed had also described crimes committed to compensate for not having enough money, either for themselves or for their children.

The majority of participants involved in this study had at least one child (though usually more), had not completed high school (though many earned their G.E.D.s while in prison), with

few having had any job training or professional skills. Nearly all women, 95% of the participants, had reported various forms of abuse (see Appendix A). This summary profile is illustrative of the growing numbers of women in prison. As stated by Owen (2001):

The story of women in prison reflects their status in society—a status that reflects ingrained racism and sexism, the subtle devaluation of women and girls, and the open toleration of sexual and domestic abuse in a male dominated society. Women’s prison, perhaps even more than its male counterpart, is a place, by and large, for people who have no place in conventional worlds, a place for those whom no one wants, or a place for women for whom there is no place else to go. (p. 245)

Bloom, Chesney-Lind, and Owen (as cited in Owen, 2001) argue that this apparent war on drugs, maintained through mandatory sentencing, is really a war against women. Society’s failure to provide adequate care and support is reflected in the absence of immediate drug treatment intervention, and instead replaced with an immediate imprisonment response. The surging numbers of women “criminals” more accurately reflects the surging numbers of women with drug addictions, who, consequently, are housed within our prisons.

Drug use is a symptom to much larger problems. It is a momentary band-aid that serves as both an escape from the harsh reality of daily existence, as well as an escape from the painful traumas of the past. In this study, women overwhelmingly described using drugs to cope. The majority of participants described a direct relationship between their drug use and their management of rage. Building upon my earlier conclusion linking rage to shame, it seems that drugs ultimately serve to cope with feelings of shame, which are compounded by forces of marginalization. Therefore, based upon the findings of this study, my third conclusion is that

there are clear links between women's social location, experiences of rage, and involvement within the criminal justice system.

#### *Contribution of Conclusions to Violence Literature*

Findings from this study have increased the understanding of women offenders of domestic violence. Based on the interviews from women who have experienced rage towards their intimate partners, some noteworthy insights have been gained that reveal circumstances in which women may act out violently. Some discoveries have been discussed within current literature, while other findings seem to have been overlooked.

When considering the primary motivational theme of women who use violence within their intimate relationships, the literature suggests that women tend to use violence as a means of self-defense or retaliation (Cascardi, Vivian, & Meyer, 1991; O'Keefe, 1997). This was similarly supported within the findings of this study. Nearly two-thirds of the women interviewed described their violent actions as provoked, in efforts to defend themselves or loved ones.

I also found, however, that some women initiate violence towards their partners outside the context of self-defense in their immediate or present situations. Such occurrences were described by more than half the women interviewed as being "rage-filled experiences." Although all women interviewed in this sample had identified experiences of rage, the women who reported initiating violence with their partner described their violent actions as a direct result of first experiencing rage. The catalyst for their rage was found in descriptions involving painful memories from the past that were triggered by their experience of or within their partner in the present. This contrasted to the other women in the sample who described experiencing rage after receiving or perceiving abuse from their partner.

In regard to Johnson and Ferraro's (2000) categories of bi-directional violence, it could be argued that women's experiences of rage towards their intimate partner may be best captured in the category of "common couple violence." These incidences occur within the context of a specific argument, as one or both partners reach a "breaking point" and physically act out toward the other. This type of violence is believed to be mutual, having a low frequency and escalation over time between couples. Johnson and Ferraro's category of "common couple violence," however, fails to discuss the catalysts that serve as the "breaking point." Triggers discovered in this study, although only revealing the "breaking point" of women, suggests that the catalyst to violence may be directly linked to past experiences rooted in shame.

The findings from this study reflected both similarities, as well as differences, to Lloyd and Emery's (2000) study of women's aggression in their intimate relationships. Both studies suggest that some women who act out violently towards their partner do so in efforts to balance control within the relationship. This is often an attempt to end abuse inflicted by the woman's partner. In contrast to Lloyd and Emery's second description for women's aggression, which was an expression of frustration or anger, this study's findings suggest that frustration and anger are not the primary triggers for women's violence. Rather, frustration and anger were repeatedly described as feelings that were able to be controlled and managed. It was the feeling of rage that felt uncontrollable and often led them to act out violently in their intimate relationship.

Similar to Hamberger's (1997) sample of women who had been arrested for domestic violence, the percentage of women from this study who had experienced and witnessed past abuse was high. For example, almost all of the participants (92%) had reported having a history of domestic violence. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of the women had identified an early caretaker

who both modeled and influenced their expressions of rage. More than half (57%) of the women reported having a history of sexual abuse.

Previous research geared towards women offenders of domestic violence has helped lay the groundwork for discussing this topic, though motivations fueling the violent actions have been limited. Based upon findings from this study, there have been some additional insights gained to further grasp the complexities involved with women who experience rage and act violently towards their partner. What has been learned is that there is a distinct difference between feeling anger and feeling rage. It is from the experience of rage, not anger, that women have described feeling out of control, thus resulting in violent actions. Furthermore, current triggers for rage often are related to past experiences that are rooted in shame. Interventions for women offenders of domestic violence will improve once greater understanding is gained for the interconnecting links between women's social location, involvement within the criminal justice system, and their feelings of rage.

#### *Limitations*

Although the findings of this study illuminated complexities of women's rage, it is important not to overlook the uniqueness of the incarcerated sample. As a result of the compounding factors of being incarcerated and being in recovery from drug addictions, the findings may not be generalizable to other non-incarcerated women without histories of addictions. The actual feeling of rage may be common, but the triggers for such an experience need to be further explored.

The sample was biased also because the participants were self-selected. The validity and reliability of women's self-report of experiencing rage is unknown. Although the screening criteria were explicitly described, the motivation behind women's volunteered participation is

uncertain. For instance, it is possible that some women participated to avoid participating in other less desirable prison activities, or for other self-serving motives. One way that this may have been avoided would have been if permission was granted by the participants to have the unit's psychologist make professional recommendations for participation in this study.

As well, it would have been useful to have the women report how many times they have been incarcerated, and to make note of the level of recidivism. By having the incarceration history of the participants, a more enriched profile could have been gained. This information could also be useful when comparing this sample to non-incarcerated women who experienced rage towards their intimate partner.

Finally, towards the end of the study I realized that without the participants sharing a common, theoretical understanding of concepts such as racism, classism, and sexism, misunderstanding and confusion may have influenced women's responses to questions regarding social location. Consequently, it is possible they underestimated how these factors may have impacted their level of rage. It may have been helpful to the participants to have examples and descriptions of sources of oppression. I may have gained more elaborate answers if these concepts were more thoroughly discussed and explained. These limitations were recognized in hindsight, and can be taken into account to improve on future studies.

#### *Implications for Clinical Practice and Future Research*

##### *Clinical Practice*

*Trauma interventions.* Eye movement desensitization reprocessing (EMDR) has been recognized as a leading clinical intervention for treating post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Chemtob, Tolin, van der Kolk, & Pitman, 2000; Van Etten & Taylor, 1998). Based on the findings from this study, focusing on feelings of shame could be targeted with EMDR, which in

turn, could reduce a woman's propensity for rage. Memories of past trauma, such as pain related to childhood abuse and neglect, could be the gateway for clinical intervention.

The traditional approach of EMDR has been a therapeutic modality used solely with individuals and their issues of trauma. There has been recent literature, however, that has expanded the linear approach of EMDR and systemically focused on the effects of trauma between couples (Flemke & Protinsky, 2001; Protinsky, Flemke, & Sparks, 2001). This intervention not only targets the individual's trauma, but also involves the partner, and addresses the effects of the trauma on the couple's system. Though research in this area is still early and anecdotal, this approach seems to be an effective intervention for couples who are at a relational impasse due to one or both partner's past trauma.

For couples that maintain a dysfunctional connection based on insecure bonds and masked feelings of shame and alienation, this approach may serve to target early sources of shame, which manifests as rage between partners. Protinsky, Sparks, & Flemke, (2001) suggest the following steps for using EMDR with couples: (a) creating safety, (b) targeting surface affect, (c) deepening to core traumatic experiences, (d) reprocessing, and finally (e) enhancing intimacy. More research needs to be done exploring the effectiveness of reducing rage between partners through the use of EMDR. This intervention used with couples needs to be further tested and built upon.

*Contextual therapy.* A useful clinical approach when dealing with couples that enter therapy for the presenting problem of a woman's rage towards her partner could be using the theoretical framework of contextual therapy (Boszormenyi-Nagy, 1987). As discovered through some of the findings of this study, experiences of rage are often a culmination of past experiences that are triggered in the present. A contextual approach strives to help individuals

and couples become aware of their motivations, and then hold them accountable for their behaviors. For instance, when using this approach with women who have had rage towards their partners, it would be necessary to explore the motivations fueling their behaviors, such as shame and alienation, and then hold them accountable for their actions.

The goal of therapy is to create balance within the ledger of the couple's relationship. This often requires having couples discover past invisible loyalties, possibly to early caretakers, they may hold that currently affect their relationship with their partner. Contextual therapy also focuses on uncovering any destructive entitlement that a partner may feel that drives their negative behavior towards their partner. For instance, any past experiences where a woman's partner has inflicted hurt or pain, either physical or emotional, may enable her to feel justified in her violent actions. Past injustices that have added to the ledger's weight of unfairness needs to be addressed and mended between the couple. The aim of treatment is to have the couple develop fairness between each other by creating a sense of balance in the costs and benefits of both their lives and their relationship.

#### *Future Research*

To further understand women's rage towards their intimate partners, future research will also need to focus on non-incarcerated women's experiences of rage. By studying women who are not involved within the criminal justice system, findings may be more generalizable to women overall. Significant differences between the two samples of women could also be compared and highlighted.

In addition to a sample comparison of women's rage towards their intimate partners, it would also be useful to study the correlation of women's rage towards their intimate partners and frequencies of being incarcerated. Although many women from this study were not arrested for

direct acts of rage towards their partners, it was discovered that their rage was often indirectly related to the reason for incarceration.

Another important aspect to study would be to learn how different racial and ethnic groups may culturally influence women in their expressions of rage. This would require exploring cultural scripts in relation to gender, emotional expression, conflict-resolution, and relational dynamics. Such findings could enhance clinical understanding and interventions for women's rage towards their partners.

*Re-considering current treatment.* This exploration of women's rage towards their intimate partner highlights various needs for future research. As many women in this study had mentioned, there needs to be more targeted treatment for dealing with women's rage. Although anger management groups can provide very useful tools for developing personal insights and conflict management techniques, it seems that a more holistic approach to dealing with relational rage needs to be developed. Current therapeutic approaches could be expanded to involve psychological, physiological, and neurological assessments. For example, it would be extremely useful to know if these women who are experiencing rage have any history of head trauma, as research suggests certain brain injuries are linked to violent and aggressive behaviors (Amen, 1998).

Feedback provided by the concluding focus groups suggested that women specifically want safe places to discuss feelings and experiences of rage. Women from both focus groups expressed how beneficial it is to know that other women, like themselves, have experienced rage towards partners. Participants discussed wanting to receive clinical treatment that specifically focuses on rage, as opposed to anger management.

*Women in prison.* What has been understood regarding treatment, research, and recovery, has been historically based on the lives of men; the experiences of women, consequently, have often been neglected (Covington, 1998). The standard for incarceration reflects prisons that are geared towards the needs of men. Many current programs and services for women inmates have been based primarily on the models derived from male inmate's programs which fail to be sensitive to gender considerations. It is necessary to intervene in the cycle of imprisonment that affects growing numbers of women. For example, the effects of poverty and compromising choices, often lead to drugs, which typically lead to prison.

Women are dealing with devastating circumstances, often without treatment, and suffering heavy punishment. Future research should focus on improving effective interventions for incarcerated women. A primary area of concentration should be on the design and enhancement of prison recovery units, as drug-related crimes directly link to the surging rates for women incarcerated. As witnessed in the OPTIONS unit, women in recovery benefit from therapeutic support groups as well as other psycho educational classes (topics that focus on healing from past rape and abuse, parenting skills, and substance abuse recovery issues).

As reflected by the findings in the *Aggression Questionnaire*, the incarcerated women in this study could benefit from anger management groups. Many women could profit in learning alternative ways to manage conflict, anger, and aggression. In addition, implementing therapeutic resources to help provide tools to deal with the layers of emotional pain would be an effective intervention.

Another important area would be offering valuable job-training skills to enable women to become more financially independent once they leave prison. Step-down employment programs could be useful to women for practicing the skills gained in prison, while being paid, as their

confidence grows. Improved efforts must be made to equip women with skills so that they are able to legally support themselves and children.

### *Summary*

This multi-method study captured incarcerated women's experiences of rage towards their intimate partners. By implementing both phenomenological and feminist critical theory constructs, both the micro and macro levels intrinsic to women's experiences of rage were discussed. These initial findings can be used to enhance future research, in efforts to ameliorate women's violence towards their intimate partners, and to develop more effective clinical interventions when dealing with this phenomenon. Until it is fully understood, it cannot be fully treated.