

Chapter Two

The Nature and Scope of Trauma

In Women's Lives



New Partnerships for Women

Introduction

Welcome to Chapter Two of the *Study Guide: The Nature And Scope Of Trauma In Women's Lives*. Our purpose in this chapter is to define what we mean by trauma, highlighting the distinction between life adversities that women face and their personal responses to those adversities. We then discuss the scope of a particular set of life adversities that we believe, and studies have shown, are important in the development of mental health and substance abuse problems among women—exposure to interpersonal violence and abuse.

Definition of Trauma

You might wonder what we mean by the term “trauma.” The term can be confusing because it is often used to refer both to events that are considered to be extremely stressful (traumatic events) *and* to the responses (psychological trauma) that develop from having experienced such events. When we speak about the “effects of trauma on women’s lives,” we are referring to *both* the effects of actual traumatic events *as well as* the effects of the psychological trauma that the events can create.

As noted in the excellent article by Esther Giller, a person experiences *psychological trauma* as a result of exposure to an extremely stressful life event or enduring conditions that ***overwhelm his or her perceived ability to cope with the circumstances***. This definition reminds us that ***it is not only the actual event or enduring conditions that are traumatic; it is also our perception of those life circumstances and our capacity to deal with them***. What makes such events or circumstances so overwhelming is that we may fear that our inability to cope with them can have life threatening consequences—we may fear for our lives, our sanity, our physical safety, even our economic survival. This could also mean that we fear we will lose the love of a parent or significant other, or fear they will leave or abandon us. In a sense, then, our reactions to traumatic events are uniquely determined in that they depend on our own individual perception of the event or circumstances, and their consequences for our well-being.

Suggested Reading:

- *What is Psychological Trauma?* by Esther Giller

However, there are certain life events or enduring circumstances that most people would perceive as extremely adverse and life threatening and likely to induce a state of psychological trauma in almost everyone exposed to them. Such traumatic events include powerful one-time incidents like accidents, natural disasters, crimes, surgeries, deaths, and other violent events. Equally, and sometimes more traumatic, are chronic or enduring life circumstances such as child abuse, neglect, combat, urban violence, concentration camps, battering relationships, racism and discrimination, and enduring economic deprivation.

This Study Guide will focus on a specific set of traumatic life events believed to play a causal role in the development of mental health and substance use problems in women; that is, exposure to interpersonal violence or abuse. We will focus in

particular on histories of physical and sexual abuse experienced at any point in the life course of women. As shown in our review of the scope of trauma in women's lives, such events begin early and recur across the life course for many women. Moreover, physical and/or sexual abuse often co-occurs with other life adversities for many women, creating stretches of life that have an unrelenting battlefield quality.

Scope of Trauma in Women's Lives

You may ask, how common are such experiences in women's lives? Community studies of the number of women who have been exposed to histories of physical or sexual abuse are typically the best source of such estimates in that they sample women from the general population.

Although there have been a number of smaller community studies, some focusing on physical abuse, others on sexual abuse, one of the largest and more recent studies that focused on both forms of abuse is the National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAW). Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the study involved telephone interviews conducted in 1995-1996 with a nationally representative sample of 8000 women and 8000 men. Major findings of the study are highlighted below:

Suggested Reading:

Prevalence, Incidence and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey (Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998)

- 52% of American women said they were physically assaulted either as a child by an adult caretaker or as an adult by any type of perpetrator. Such assaults included a range of behaviors, from slapping and hitting to using guns.
- 18% of women surveyed said they experienced a completed or attempted rape at some time in their life involving forced vaginal, oral or anal intercourse.
- Combining responses to both types of abuse, the study found that 55% of women had experienced either physical or sexual abuse in their lifetimes.

These are sobering findings in that they show that over half of adult women are victimized either sexually or physically. Moreover, many become first-time victims during childhood or adolescence—an experience that is associated with a higher risk of physical and sexual assaults during adulthood.

- More than half of the female rape victims (54%) were under 18 years of age when they experienced their first rape—22% of women who disclosed rape were under 12 years of age when it first happened; 32% were first raped between 12 and 17 years of age
- Over three quarters (76%) of the women who reported some form of physical abuse in their lifetimes reported having been physically assaulted by a caretaker as a child or adolescent
- Each form of childhood victimization experience is linked with twice the risk of being an adult victim of sexual or physical assaults compared to

women who did not report being physically assaulted by a caretaker or raped as a child or adolescent

But, you might ask, what makes this a women's issue? Aren't men also victims of violence? Yes, men are victims of violence. In fact, in the NVAW study, more men than women reported experiencing physical assaults in their lifetime—66.4%. Moreover, over 80% of men who reported such victimization experiences said they were physically assaulted by a caretaker as a child or adolescent. However, there are several features of the experiences of women and men that seem to be quite different:

- Women are six times as likely as men (18% vs. 3%) to report being sexually assaulted and/or raped in their lifetime
- Such victimization experiences often first occur in childhood in the context of one's own family for girls and are more likely to involve *both* sexual and physical abuse than is the case for boys
- As girls become young women or adults, they are at significantly greater risk than men of being assaulted by an intimate partner
 - 25% of women compared to 8% of men reported being raped and/or physically assaulted by a current or former spouse, cohabiting partner, boyfriend or girlfriend, or date in their lifetime
 - Moreover, gender differences in rates of physical assaults by an intimate partner become greater as the seriousness of the assault increases
- Women are stalked (followed by someone who induces a high level of fear) in disproportionate numbers compared to men (8% vs. 2%) and their stalkers are often current or former intimates
- Violence against *adult* women is primarily intimate partner violence
 - 64% of women who reported being raped, physically assaulted, and/or stalked since age 18 were victimized by a current or former husband, cohabitating partner, boyfriend, girlfriend, or date
 - By contrast, only 16.2% of the men who reported being raped and/or physically assaulted since age 18 were victimized by such a perpetrator
- Violence against *adult* women, and men, is primarily male violence
 - 93% of women and 86% of men who were raped and/or physically assaulted since the age of 18 were assaulted by a male
 - By contrast, 11% of women and 23% of men were assaulted by a female

These findings, which have been reported in studies around the world and across racial and ethnic groups, have led the Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) to conclude that violence against women and girls is gender-based violence that must be recognized as a major public health concern and a violation of human rights (1999). They note:

It is often known as “gender-based” violence because it evolves in part from women’s subordinate status in society. Many cultures have beliefs, norms, and social institutions that legitimize and therefore perpetuate violence against women. The same acts that would be punished if directed at an employer, a neighbor, or an acquaintance often go unchallenged when men direct them at women, especially within the family.

In short, whether you are black, white, Asian, Latina, Native American, or some mixture of these racial or ethnic identities, if you are a woman, the odds are over 50% that you will have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence in your lifetime, according to findings reported by the NVAW survey. Although there is some variation in rates of different types of violence across these groups of women, the overriding conclusion is that violence against women—particularly violence perpetrated by men—is a cross-cultural experience.

Does this mean that women are never violent or abusive toward others? No it does not. In fact, we encounter many women who describe experiences of childhood abuse and cruelty that are perpetrated by mothers or female caretakers, and who, themselves, have either neglected or emotionally, physically or sexually abused their own children. Unfortunately, community studies, such as the NVAW study, do not provide a breakdown of rates of childhood abuse of different forms perpetrated by men versus women. The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Systems (NCANDS), which summarizes reports by states on the numbers of children who enter the public child welfare system, do show that child maltreatment that comes to the attention of authorities occurs primarily at the hands of parents, and especially mothers. In its most recent report of findings from 2003 maltreatment statistics (U.S. Children’s Bureau, 2005), 12.4 children per 1000 were maltreated and most of the perpetrators (80%) were parents. Moreover, women comprise a larger percentage of all perpetrators than men—58% compared to 42%. Again, because most child maltreatment does not come to the attention of authorities, these numbers are much smaller than numbers from community studies, such as the NVAW survey. Moreover, they show that the most common form of maltreatment is neglect (60% of victims), followed by physical abuse (20%), sexual abuse (10%), and emotional maltreatment (5%).

You may, in fact, be a victim of some form of abuse at the hands of a woman, perhaps your mother, or you may have victimized your own children. This should not surprise any of us as women do most of the caretaking of children. Moreover, sometimes women do not protect their children from abuse at the hands of men, whether fathers, step-fathers, or boyfriends. Often they do not protect themselves from such violence and children suffer from witnessing it. It is, in fact, violence against adult women that the NVAW Survey was primarily designed to investigate. The finding that most adult violence that women experience is perpetrated by men, usually a date, boyfriend, partner, or spouse, does not mean that *only* men are perpetrators. Nor does it mean that all women are in intimate relationships with only men.

Tjaden and Thoennes (2000) asked if men and women who reported ever living with a same-sex partner as a couple experienced more or less violence than men and women who had only lived with an opposite-sex intimate partner. Their initial findings suggested that same-sex intimate relationships were more violent than opposite-sex relationships:

- 39.2% of women with a history of same-sex cohabitation and 21.7% of women with a history of opposite-sex cohabitation reported being either raped, physically assaulted, or stalked by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime
- 23.2% of men with a history of same-sex cohabitation and 7.4% of men with a history of opposite-sex cohabitation reported being either raped, physically assaulted, or stalked by an intimate partner at some point in their lifetime

However, when they analyzed the data separately for male and female perpetrators, they found a significant gender difference in patterns of partner violence for men and women in same-sex relationships:

- Only 11.4% of women with a history of same-sex cohabitation had ever been victimized by a female co-habiting partner, while 30.8% had been victimized by a male co-habiting partner
- Conversely, 15.4% of men with a history of same-sex cohabitation had been victimized by a male co-habiting partner, while only 10.6% had been victimized by a wife or female co-habiting partner

These findings suggest that intimate partner violence is perpetrated primarily by men, whether against male or female partners.

The NVAW survey also found that women of color are exposed to more partner violence than white women (28.6% vs. 24.8%). However, victimization rates differ significantly by racial identity status:

- 15% of Asian Pacific Islander women reported being victimized by an intimate partner in their lifetimes--the lowest rate of all the groups
- 37.5% of American Indian/Alaska Native women reported being victimized by an intimate partner in their lifetimes--the highest rate of all groups
- Women of mixed racial backgrounds and African American women reported comparable rates of intimate partner victimization--30.2% and 29.1% respectively

Finally, the NVAW survey found no significant difference in rates of partner violence for Hispanic and non-Hispanic women--23.4% of Hispanic women and 25.6% of non-Hispanic women reported being victimized in their lifetime by an intimate partner.

In summary, while there is some evidence that rates of partner violence vary across racial and ethnic groups, it is clear that intimate partner violence is a major risk for women who enter into intimate, co-habiting relationships. In an analysis of what increases the risk of such violent experiences for women, independent of race or ethnic identity, the NVAW survey identified several risk factors:

- having been physically abused as a child by a caretaker
- having a higher educational level than one's partner
- cohabiting or living with a partner
- having a partner who is jealous or possessive
- having a partner who is verbally abusive

You may be asking yourself, "Why is it important for me to have to learn these unpleasant facts about women's shared victimization experiences?" We think there are four reasons. First, there is a growing body of evidence that histories of physical and/or sexual abuse are linked with a wide range of personal problems in women's adult lives. In a follow-up study of the health impacts of violence based on the NVAW survey, Thompson and her colleagues (Thompson, Arias, Basile, and Desai, 2002) found that both physical and sexual victimization in childhood were significantly associated with women's poorer perception of general health, sustaining a serious injury, acquiring a mental health condition, and using drugs and alcohol in adulthood. Similarly, the Adverse Child Experiences (ACE) study, conducted with over 19,000 enrollees in the Kaiser Permanente Health Plan in California, has concluded that abuse and household dysfunction during childhood increases the risk of a range of health problems among adults (Felitti et al., 1998). Such problems include a higher risk of cigarette smoking, obesity, physical inactivity, alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, suicide attempts, sexual promiscuity, and sexually transmitted diseases. You may be grappling with one or more of these problems, but not considered the possibility that abuse experiences in your life may have contributed to these problems. We think it is important for women to know about, and reflect on, these larger patterns as a beginning step in self understanding and self-caring, as well as collective actions.

Second, in our experiences in talking with women who participated in the Women and Mental Health Study Site (WAMHSS), we were struck by how common physical and sexual abuse is in the lives of women who enter the alcohol, drug, and mental health (ADM) systems of care. As shown in the suggested reading (Newmann and Sallmann, 2005), 88% of the women interviewed reported having experienced either physical or sexual abuse in their lives—a much higher percent than shown for women in the general population (NVAW Survey).

Suggested Reading:

Women and Trauma Histories: Assessing the Scope of the Problem in the ADM System (Newmann and Sallmann, 2005)

Although these findings reflect the epidemic nature of violence in women's lives, many women, including a number of us involved in drafting this document, have often felt very alone in experiencing abuse. We thought that we were the only ones this was happening to. In fact, many women told us after the interview that it had been a relief to be asked, and to be able to report, their abuse experiences, since so many women had never had it publicly acknowledged in their lives. Equally important, it was a relief for many women to discover that other women had had similarly painful and difficult life experiences, because it helped them feel less alone. So one of our goals in sharing these findings with you, which are reported in more detail in the suggested reading, is to help you take stock of your own experiences and, if you have

experienced such traumas in your life, understand that you are not alone. Nor are you without support and resources to cope with such realities.

A third reason we think it is important for you to become familiar with information about violence in women's lives is that gender-linked violence goes beyond experiences of physical and sexual abuse. In the WAMHSS study, we discovered that three quarters of women report experiences of emotional abuse or neglect; that is, affirming the experience of being frequently shamed, embarrassed, ignored, or repeatedly told that they were no good. Over a third of the women have been separated from a child against their will (through loss of custody, or visitation or kidnapping), close to 60% have been sent to jail and more than 70% report having had serious money problems, for example, not enough money for food or a place to live. In short, these are women who face many adversities on a daily basis, including sexual harassment in the workplace or job (48%) and violence even at the hands of service providers—30% of the women report having been strip-searched, forcibly restrained, or held against their will by a provider of mental health or substance abuse services. We note these traumas, and will discuss them further as we progress through the curriculum, as a number are particularly troubling for women.

Fourth, in the chapter that follows, we will review several prominent theories, and related evidence, about how such abuse experiences and related life adversities may be linked to mental health and substance use problems, as well as to their co-occurrence, among adult women. We will also highlight sources of resilience and strength in women's lives that can help prevent the development of such problems. We believe that a better understanding of such processes, pathways and "protective" mechanisms will be helpful in developing your own theory of risk and protective factors in your life, and ultimately empower you to move forward in your own healing and recovery. We think it will also help you seek the help you may need from care providers who are both "trauma-informed" and who can offer "trauma-specific" services, if and when you feel you need them.

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