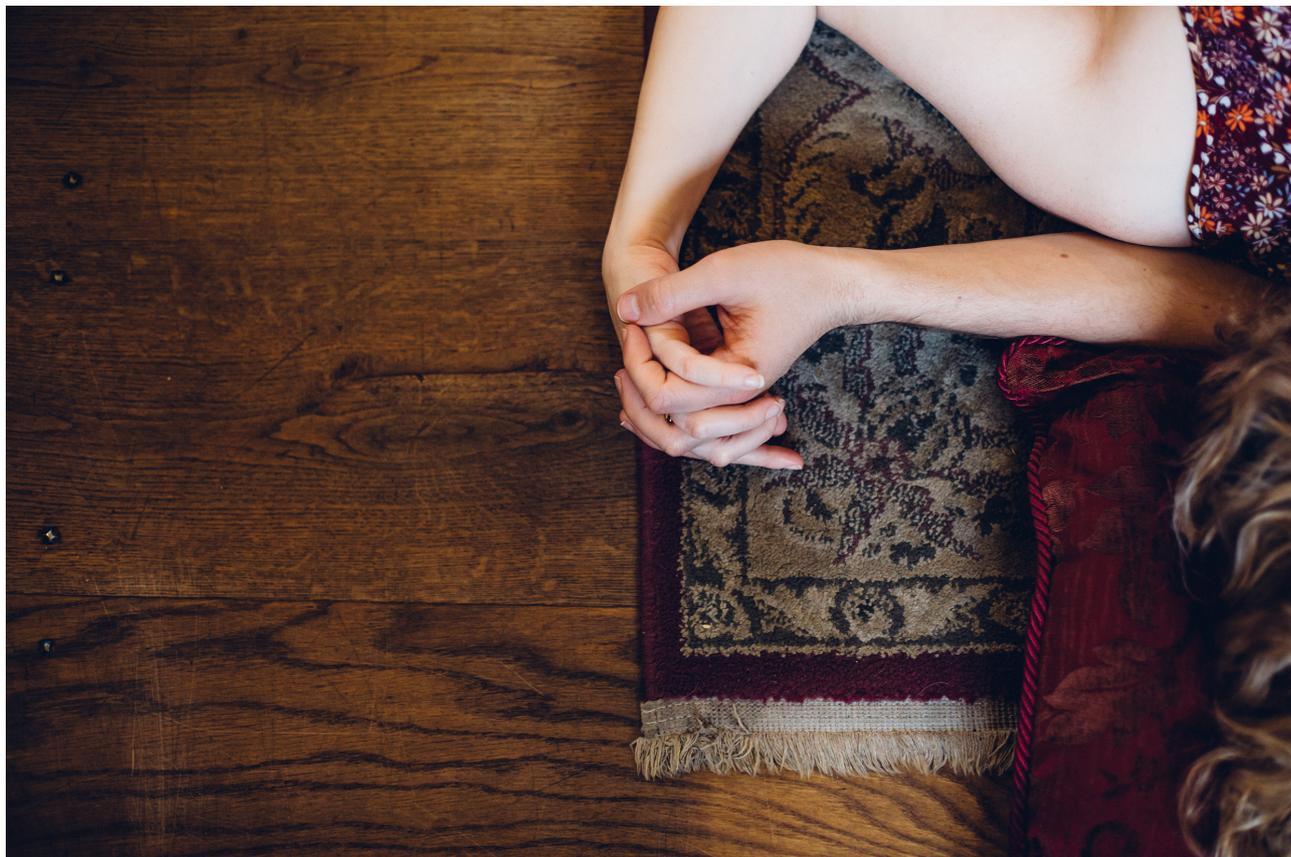


Un modello integrato per la violenza domestica

Intervista a Leonore Walker

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Per gli operatori e le operatrici che si occupano di violenza di genere uno dei temi da approfondire è senz'altro il rapporto dello psicologo/a rispetto alla violenza domestica e alla sua funzione di agente di cambiamento o di mantenimento dello *status quo* rispetto al cambiamento sociale. La formalizzazione della professione e lo stretto legame fra sistemi punitivi giudiziari e la professione di psicologo ritengo che necessiti di un approfondimento e di chiavi di lettura e di decostruzione. Dobbiamo ripensare Foucault alla luce dei "processi di normalizzazione" della famiglia e della genitorialità e dobbiamo interrogarci su come le strutture di potere, nell'occidente moderno, tentino di controllare gli individui e i loro corpi nello sforzo di contenere tutte le forme di disadattamento, devianza o non-allineamento rispetto alla norma familiare costituita. Quello che sta avvenendo anche in Italia - movimenti di padri separati, la falsa idea che le denunce di violenza e abusi delle madri siano "false e strumentali" e lo spazio e il campo, che hanno ottenuto falsi costrutti come la PAS (Sindrome da alienazione parentale) - ci obbliga a porci domande sul sapere che informa la cultura psicologica dominante in Italia.

Di questo approfondimento sul tema ne parliamo con Lenore Walker, uno dei personaggi più importanti del panorama psicologico internazionale che si occupano o hanno riflettuto a lungo sui temi della violenza contro le donne.

Q. World Health Organization has classified violence as a complex phenomena that should be treated with an integrated and ecological model of violence. However working in this field we often come up against barriers because there is a polarization between seeing violence as primarily a social problem or primarily a psychological/individual problem. What is your take on this?

W. World Health Organization has advocated an integrated approach that requires an integrated perspective to tackle the issue of domestic violence. This includes both an ecological model and a model that integrates the psychological injuries that can occur to the individuals involved.

There has been a historical divide between advocates and professionally trained workers. I think this is an issue that is in the past since now since many advocates and professionally trained workers understand that you need to have an integrated approach.

The situation of the shelters is quite stable because there is government funding. The cost of this stability is the requirement to follow government regulations. That does limit what you can do in some ways, especially when there are political changes.

We don't know where that will be going now given the economic and political changes around the world that seem to be taking away women's rights. Many shelters were set up under conservative governments, they had a focus on punishing perpetrators and they liked the idea of locating people and setting things up within a criminal code system. We probably will see more of this as a means of dealing with all forms of violence around the world but less emphasis on protecting women and children.

Q. You are talking about the dichotomy being in the past tense. I am interested in knowing what you think helped to overcome this polarization between advocates and professionals?

W. I think we are still working it through, one of the things that changed is that APA (American Psychological Association) has a very strong focus on trauma that leads to a focus on domestic and gender violence, maybe because I have been an active part in this. Also many states require continuing education, colleges for example, and in some states professionals and college graduates must take credits in domestic violence. That has put the topic on the agenda and it is not marginalized any more.

Many universities have well trained academics and also lawyers are trained. It is not quite mainstreamed in all universities and not all have specific courses, but it is not marginalized any more. In my university many of those entering for advanced degrees have worked as advocates and want more training to deal with the complex issues presented by those who have experienced all forms of gender violence such as rape, sexual harassment, sex trafficking, child sexual abuse and intimate partner violence.

We have also many activists in professional training schools, this is also been very important. Shelter workers understood that they were in a dead-end job, they had to get additional training and so they went back to school for training. Some of my best intern students are students that have worked for several years in the field of violence against women.

Q. I find that there has been quite a bit of focus on trauma even in Europe, but not necessarily informed by a gender perspective. Is there a risk that this might lead to a medicalized notion of violence and trauma?

W. You are correct in that knowing about trauma alone does not provide a sufficient lens but it helps to better understand gender violence when it is on the forefront. Maybe those that are working on war trauma are going to have a harder time to perceive a gender perspective, but there are a lot of professionals working in the field related to trauma that I think are going to help put violence as a feminist issue high on the agenda. This is where advocates can be very helpful in continuing to call out those who forget about the need for gender sensitivity.

Q. As we know violence is a violation of the Criminal Code. However in practice the lines are in many cases not so clear cut. What is your positioning as a psychologist with the inevitable gray areas we must face in working with violence?

W. We are seeing less enthusiasm of the criminal justice system to continue to protect women.

At the same time the laws and recommendations that we have seem to be outdated and are not working very well. We noted this not only in domestic violence but also in sexual

assault cases. There was a controversy that followed two different sexual assault cases with young men in the last year that illustrates this issue. One was a young college student who sexually assaulted a women (n.d.r. Brocke case of Stanford student <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/06/us/sexual-assault-brock-turner-stanford/index.html>) and was given a very light sentence by the court in California and the second was Lochte, the athlete/swimmer at world Olympics in Brazil (http://www.espn.com/olympics/swimming/story/_/id/17340997/olympics-rio-2016-lochte-incident-know-know-far9) who was vilified for his sexually violent and inappropriate behavior. The two events had different outcomes and many people wanted heavier consequences and were unhappy with the response of the criminal justice system. I was forced to re-think my positions because I was teaching a feminist psychology course and my students asked me to take a stand. The question for me caused me to take a look at what we know of the criminal justice system. If this young man was sentenced to a longer period in prison what would happen to him? He would be punished, for sure, and punishment is appropriate for the behavior, but he would probably come out of there without any learning anything to overcome his sexist attitudes that would help him become a decent citizen as he grew up. And given his family's status he would probably marry, have children and harm his wife or children in some way, because this man was not properly socialized at home or in his community and prison does not do the job. So you have to make a decision on what we want to do. Do we want to retrain and resocialize these young men who seem to think that they can do as they wish with women or do we want to punish them and not really change society? The question it has raised for me is: how much, by using the criminal justice system alone, are we really changing society?

We have to question that. In the domestic violence realm there are a now locations where there are good policies in place and a lot of arrests, but we are not differentiating who we are using these policies with. It's a one size fits all; while for some people you need to use punishment because this is the only thing that is going to get their attention and stop their violent and criminal behavior. For other people just the arrest itself can be punishment enough and in those cases you could go forward interventions to re-socialize and change behavior. As a psychologist I think we have a responsibility to reevaluate a lot of what we have been doing in the criminal justice area. Take a look at what and how things are really working and what we still need to do to change the way society views women and the way both men and women view relationships.

I also think that we need to be careful as psychologists because we have delegated our role in understanding complexity to the State. Certainly, we are required to file child abuse reporting, the law is very clear. You can be punished for a willful non-report. So you really have to think about how you define what child abuse is. In doing this you must take into account that each State has different laws, as we know different countries have different legal boundaries. Basically we are told that as psychologist we shouldn't look at the complex details of the situations, rather we should just hand the investigations over to the State agencies. They will be doing the deconstruction of what is happening, but they have much less training than we have in understanding complexity. It's frustrating yet, I think

you have to ask yourself the question: are we saving lives? Children's lives? Since I think compulsory state reports do save lives, I think we should follow the regulations. At the same time I think that by reporting we are not helping people recover from the abuse. We need to have more programs for prevention and treatment.

Q. I still think that the more we move into gray areas the harder it gets. If we have clear cut situations like sexual abuse or hitting or slapping or punching, it's easy to see how it is essential to protect the children through legal agencies, but the more we consider behaviors that until very recently have been forms of disciplining children, then it becomes gradually more unclear what the most helpful form of intervention might be. How do we help the victim go in a helpful direction? How are you going to authentically help the people coming to us and how do we make those calls?

W. In a new book on research into the issues around sex trafficking we are looking at the links with child abuse because the children that have been raised in families in which abuse is taking place are much more vulnerable if the child goes into the public care system, i.e. foster care. The more you try and work at different levels of prevention, identification and intervention the more aspects of complexity come out. A lot of boys are being trafficked yet we know very little about them. We also are being forced to think about women and the use of violence from the study of sex trafficking and better understand how do victims become victimizers? A large number of women are being arrested as traffickers, many of whom were victims originally, but were appointed as the trafficker's assistant in controlling the women he has ultimate control over. Now part of this problem, I think, in many cases the women arrested are, perhaps unintentionally, taking the blame for the top guys that lead the trafficking businesses. Nonetheless, these women are using violence to control other women. So how does the woman victim become the victimizers? As feminists we want to believe biology plays such a big role in aggression. Well here is an area that is telling a different story.

Q. What, do you think, is the most challenging aspect of working with violence?

W. I think the inability to protect women and children even after divorce remains a major problem all over the world. One of the fundamental tools of a batterer is the coercive control he uses over the women and children that does not stop even if we stop the physical or sexual abuse. What do we do about the children in the home where divorce and dissolution are taking place? We force shared parental responsibility, keeping the potential for continued coercive control to take place. We are teaching women to stand up for themselves and not take violence any more and we are sending children into relationships of forced co-parenting in which the mother and children have less protection. They have to live and spend parenting time with the abuser who often is not getting any kind of intervention to not use abuse and power and control, which is ongoing. Our family courts,

in my professional opinion, should be blown up and start over. It is a myth that children need two parents to grow up healthy and strong. This belief is not accurate. Psychology tells us they need two healthy parents, sure, but if one is not cooperating and using coercive control tactics to get what he wants, we can't possibly think that these kids are going to grow up okay. And they can possibly do very well with only one parent. There are many examples of one parent being in the army, being deployed during the war or other military operations and gone for a year or two and the kids do just fine. There are many ways of children connecting with other role models in their lives. The batterer needs to be held accountable for his violent behavior. If he wants to have access to his kids, the burden of proof should be on the man that he has stopped his behavior of abuse of power and control. Until we solve this problem we will not solve the problem of domestic violence because some women won't leave an abusive partner because they can protect their children better by staying in the relationship. This is scary. It's safer to be in the domestic violence than to try to make a new life for themselves. These women are forced to live in the proximity of the abuser, forced to exchange children back and forth, and in many cases, this is causing what I call iatrogenic disorders in the family. I had a case last week in which the judge got angry at the mother because she wasn't getting a psychological evaluation fast enough, so he just changed the child to the father's home rather than the mother's home and that meant the child had to change schools, activities and friends. All this because the judge was punishing the mother, but in the end the whole family was totally disintegrating and this is much more dysfunctional than if the judge would have tried to understand the situation and had given the women a little more time to do what she had to do. This is what happens when the courts get overloaded, don't understand and they get really angry rather than deal with it from another perspective. That is one of the areas I am very unhappy about.

What do you think your personal contribution has been to this field and how would you like your legacy to be taken forward?

W. I have just announced my retirement from the University so I can now think of other things I want to do with my life. I have been wanting to retire for a long time, but there was nobody there to take my place. Recently the University hired two psychologists, both men, that have the psychology and forensic skills and are very sensitive to gender topics and I think they are going to be very good. One of them has been using statistics to validate my model of battered woman syndrome which is very exciting. It's interesting you ask this question because that was the question that they asked: what can we do to help your legacy?

The legacy I am interested in is to continue to help the women become stronger and able to live their lives as they want. My university made me a wonderful retirement party and invited all the students and others in the local community to donate whatever money they could afford towards a scholarship in my name for a woman graduate student to continue

to study gender violence and domestic violence. We were able to raise sufficient funds to do that. I want to be part of leaving the world a better place because of the work that we have been doing. Some days this seems to be a difficult task but I won't stop trying. Of course, I do want more focus on the children and if we don't work on prevention we are not going to end domestic violence. We just really have to pay attention to stopping child abuse and domestic violence in their homes. I don't think there is any other way to prevent the next generation from using coercive control and violence when it works. .

Q. Looking back at the cycle of violence that really started a whole movement: what do you feel is still accurate, what do you feel has developed from that? What would you revise? What is your positioning on that?

We have been collecting data on that for the past 20 years and we are finally getting around to analyze the Battered Women Syndrome Questionnaire and that is one of the legacies I want to complete before I leave.

I think the cycle is still a very helpful tool, but it's only one of many tools. It helps people see how they get reinforced to stay in abusive relationships, because there are rewards. It helps people understand that violence doesn't happen all the time in these relationships that it is sporadic but there may be a pattern and if you can locate the pattern you can do something about it so that you don't fall into the reinforcement patterns that keep people stuck. Nowadays we have validated the Battered Women's Syndrome Questionnaire and we are about to publish it as a test to see if someone has developed battered woman syndrome. I just published the fourth edition of the Battered Woman Syndrome book with the new research. It is quite clear that there is such a thing as the Battered Woman Syndrome that has features together with post traumatic stress disorder criteria, but also has distinctive characteristics. We found there were 4 items taken from the DSM plus 4 additional factors. In all there are 8 criteria that make up battered woman syndrome. The specific 4 are: 1) disrupted interpersonal relationships, that comes from a lot of the isolation and the power and control of the batterer; 2) body image dysfunction that comes from difficulties with body image and somatic complaints. This make sense because we know the body and the mind are connected, so if you have a lot of stress there are going to be consequences on the body, 3) sexual dysfunction that we see in a lot of the women that also have sexual abuse in their history, and 4) Dissociation or tendency for their mind to wander and dissociate, especially during traumatic events. Trauma research has confirmed those four criteria to be quite well cloistered together although we discovered the relationship with dissociation during the validation process. I think we are getting closer and closer to a more uniform and measurable definition than we have had in the past. We also know battered women don't just have domestic violence in their history, they have all sorts of different issues, maybe other trauma events, and they all integrate together. I think all this research helps to guide intervention and prevention approaches.

Q. What kind of influence (if any) has working in this field had on your personal life?

W. My personal life has gone well. My partner and I have been together for a long time, he is also a psychologist and we share a lot of work interests. Our children and grandchildren are doing well; we have lots of friends and family. We are in a good place and that is one of the reasons I want to retire; I also want to write a novel. That is my next frontier and the next challenge I want to climb. I want to write some fiction because I have a million stories in my head and I think that people can tune into stories even more that if they explain psychological truths, so I want to blend the two together. I have a lot of ideas but I haven't really had the time to try my hand at fiction. I am ready for an interesting change. I stopped a lot of my crazy travel so I am not on the airplane as much as I used to be and that is also much better for me physically and psychologically. We live at the beach and we have a wonderful house and view and place to be at to consolidate all I have learned through my life so far.

Q. What do you think the most important training aspect is for a young psychologist wanting to pursue the work in the field of domestic violence?

W. I think they should get more involved in social justice issues. Domestic violence is only one of many issues of social justice that we face in the world today and they are all interconnected, so we cannot only work on domestic violence. You have to see how this fits in the broader picture, in the larger scheme of things, because otherwise you can get discouraged. Social change doesn't go forward in a straight line and you have to see where it all fits in: step forwards, step backwards, a step to the side and that is the way social change happens, so you have to fit it into the complexity. Most of our clinical training programs that are APA accredited are still less concerned with social justice issues, although they are trying to include that perspective. We have a lot of things we think we have to have people trained in that I think could be done at a different stage, not in graduate clinical training. I would take out some of those duplicates and place much greater emphasis on social psychology interventions really look and think at how people behave and not just being technique-driven but thinking through how behavior change occurs and is maintained. We need to start our conversation about defining what are our goals and how do we get to those goals. We have the best students coming through our doctoral programs we need to train them to be able to think through and around complex issues.

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