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Healing Communities: Dr. Carolyn West Brings Domestic Violence Issues to Light

Dr. Carolyn M. West writes, trains, consults, and lectures nationally on interpersonal violence and sexual assault, with a special focus on violence in the lives of African American women. She is Associate Professor of Psychology and the Bartley Dobb Professor for the Study and Prevention of Violence in the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Program at the University of Washington, Tacoma.



In an interview with *Colors of Influence*, Dr. West talks about the complex issue of domestic violence and offers suggestions about effective ways to stop the hurting.

Why did you choose to focus your research on the subject of domestic violence? I was about 12 years old when I got my first adult library card. One of the first books that I checked out of the library was a book called "Scream Quietly or the Neighbors Will Hear." It was one of the earlier books on domestic violence. I saw the researcher Murray Strauss' name listed in the book. I was 12 years old and I dreamed of working with him. Years later, I did work with him when I got my Ph.D.

In graduate school, my adviser was looking at dating relationships. Although I had no interest in dating relationships, I found a really good article on dating violence, so I decided that will be my area of focus.

I wanted to know if we can stop the violence from carrying over into marital relationships that may involve children.

Why are these issues important to you? Being a psychologist, no matter what area you're working in, domestic violence seems to be at the root of many problems, in some form or fashion. From working in prisons to university counseling, and working with people who has substance abuse issues, somewhere along the line, there was childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, or something of that nature. My work focuses on figuring out how we can deal with these issues and stop a lot of social problems, pretty early on.

What accounts for higher rates of domestic violence in the African-American community? That's such a good question, and a very sensitive one. There are a variety of reasons for these challenges. Certainly poverty and lack of economic resources play a huge role. On the other hand, we know that not all battered women – even Black women – are impoverished.

For Black women, there's a desperate need to love our brothers, and maintain these relationships despite all the challenges. I think a lot of it is faith-based. I'm very involved in my faith community and have worked in other faith communities. There's sexism there, just as there is in the larger society. A big part of our culture and our faith tells us that we are to sacrifice ourselves to maintain our families and communities. That belief that is so deeply ingrained in us, that sometimes causes us to stay in unhealthy relationships.

I think another big thing is that we don't even identify or label relationships that are unhealthy. I've met women who have said to me, "I didn't know that I was a battered woman until he was banging my head on the concrete." How can we allow the situation to get to that point?

Maybe as Black women, we're so used to challenges. Maybe sometimes we don't even expect happy and healthy relationships, that we don't even identify the level of violence in our lives.

How do historical factors and experiences with violence play a role? There has always been a long history of violence toward the African-American community. It's a lot easier to talk about that than violence within the African-American community. If you take any group of people and they're victimized to that extent, one doesn't get over that history that quickly. Take, for example, a family history of alcoholism or domestic violence, and you see that passed down many generations.

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I was always interested in how historical and cultural traumas have impacted communities of color and other communities that have experienced oppression. When I was working on my Ph.D., I studied the Holocaust. I spent about a month visiting concentration camps throughout Europe. It was the 50 th anniversary of the liberation of many of those camps. I gained an understanding of how the Holocaust has impacted generations of Jewish people. Parents and grandparents went through it, and in many cases, the experience shaped their ability to parent. How do you explain to your children grandchildren why you don't have any parents or siblings, when they have all been killed during the Holocaust? How do you explain this need to be fearful, and to set up one's life in a way that makes it easy to flee or escape, should that need arise? All of those historical factors deeply impact us.

My grandmother grew up in the South, born and raised in Arkansas. Hearing about living on the plantations and the history of lynchings, it almost makes you distrust the police. With such a historical context, if you have domestic violence in your home, there's a chance that you're going to be apprehensive about turning to those systems that have historically not treated us well, even in contemporary times.

How do the stress and anxiety of dealing with prejudice contribute to domestic violence? It's hard to get away from what psychologists call "micro-aggressions," these slights that you deal with everyday. Often, it's hard to figure out whether it's about race or gender, or nothing really, and you spend a lot of emotional energy dealing with all of it. You can't lash out publicly, and you end up taking so much of that home with you, and causes you to lash out against people who are close to you.

We see the middle class and upper middle class dealing with these micro-aggressions. I can walk into a high-end department store and they don't see a well-educated woman: what they see is my ethnicity. So they may follow me around, and make me feel like a criminal. These experiences add another layer of stress, anxiety and frustration. When we don't have a place to process these micro-aggressions, they end up getting acted out.

Why is it important for the community to break the silence, and get these issues out? Silence is historically how we've coped. You think about the experience of many enslaved women who have been sexually assaulted. Who can they talk to? There was no one to turn to, no place to go. We've kept silent a lot, so that we wouldn't reinforce myths and stereotypes about our community. But it's too big a problem, and we can't move forward as a community unless we start talking about domestic violence. It's related to so many issues: homelessness, HIV, incarceration rates, high school dropout rates. We can begin to effectively address these community problems, when we begin to effectively address the issue of domestic violence.

We get too invested in protecting the wrong people. Like high-profile people in our community, like R. Kelly – people who allegedly sexually victimize young girls. We're so busy trying to create this united front, and end up defending people who should not be defended. Closing ranks and protecting the wrong people doesn't serve our community in the long haul.

Why is it important for professionals working with domestic violence to take into account cultural factors when dealing with the issue? That's always going to be a challenge in the work we do as researchers and psychologists. There is some truth that there are lots of similarities in experiences, factors and situations, so we end up being culturally blind, but there are also some very important differences. If we don't take these differences into account, we end up missing things and not being able to help people.

Culture matters. People have multiple identities – gender, ethnicity, faith, social class – all those things interact and shape your experience. In terms of how you seek help, or how the system responds to you when you seek help.

Among communities of color, what strategies are effective in talking about domestic violence? It's going to require not only women of color sitting and talking with all women, the Black community needs to talk about these issues, talking within our own community.

The best thing is to acknowledge that it is, and has been, a problem, so we can start to support each other. Education is important. There's a lot of victim-blaming that goes on, because we don't understand the dynamics of the problem. We end up shaming people into silence.

It's such a prevalent and pervasive problem, and the first step to healing is to just start talking about it. It's also important to provide safe spaces for people to talk about the issues.

How do you engage the batterer in the discussion? I work closely with my colleague, Oliver Williams from the University of Minnesota. He does a lot of work around Black men who are perpetrators. The solution, ultimately, is having men talk to other men and hold everyone accountable. They can stop domestic violence and sexual assault tomorrow, if they wanted to. It's gotta be men talking to men.

Domestic violence issues are so complex when you talk about communities of color.

Black men who batter may have gender power in the community, but within the larger society, they're disadvantaged because of race. Sorting out being simultaneously advantaged and disadvantaged further adds more complexity. The challenge is how can we help men without vilifying them. It's easy to paint the batterer as an evil monster kind of person. Having worked with men from all ethnic backgrounds, I've seen that they are in a lot of pain too. That doesn't excuse what they do, but it's important to recognize their challenges,

other."

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while also holding them accountable for their actions.

What are some of the most important messages in your collective body of work? Violence could happen to anybody. People may look so "together," but you never know what's going on in people's homes. That's one big important message. We can all heal and we can all work to heal ourselves. It could be a long road, but it's possible.

What do you find most challenging about the research that you do? Sometimes it gets really depressing. Domestic and sexual violence is so pervasive, such a big problem, that it sometimes feels that there's no way to end it or fix it, or make it better. When I think about the statistic that on average three to four American women are murdered every day as a result of domestic violence, that makes me really sad. But it also keeps me doing the work, and helps me to stay focused on what's really important.

Sometimes the work also feels like it puts one at odds with communities of color. You're seen as airing dirty laundry, because you're bringing up issues that no one wants to talk about.

Who are some of the most surprising allies in doing this work? It's always nice to encounter feminist men who "get it," and understand that confronting these issues will have a profound impact on the quality of their lives.

What do you find most rewarding about your work? Seeing people make the connections. I teach a course on family violence. It's always rewarding to see students want to have healthier relationships and identify the abuse in their lives and do something to change that.

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