15

Toward an ecological model of violence among African Americans

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Introduction

> [I]t is easier to talk about violence as an individual pathology than it is to think about violence as a product of systemic inequalities that act on and through individuals in ways we don't yet fully understand.
>
> *(Jones, 2004, p. 23)*

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a major social and public health problem with significant costs to individuals, families, communities, and society. Relationship abuse affects women and men across all ages, cultures, sexual orientations, gender identities, income levels, and racial/ethnic groups, although not necessarily at the same rates. For example, when compared with their White and Latino/a counterparts, African Americans,[1] whether as individuals or couples, consistently reported higher rates of overall, severe, mutual, and recurrent past-year and lifetime physical IPV victimization and perpetration in general population, community, and university samples (for a review, see West, 2012). To illustrate, in a national survey, 45.1 percent of Black women and 40.1 percent of Black men had been victims of sexual violence, physical aggression, and/or stalking that was committed by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Smith et al., 2017). Based on these prevalence rates, it is estimated that more than 6 million African American women and nearly 5 million African American men are survivors of some form of IPV (Black et al., 2011).

However, race, by itself, is not a sufficient explanatory variable in determining causes of IPV. In fact, after controlling for concentrated neighborhood disadvantage, such as high rates of poverty and community violence, racial differences in rates of partner abuse between Blacks and Whites was greatly diminished, which "suggest[s] that the correlation between race and domestic violence is confounded with the different ecological contexts in which African Americans and whites reside" (Benson et al., 2004, pp. 336–337). Consequently, no single factor can explain why some people or groups are at higher risk for violence in their intimate relationships; rather, abuse is an outcome of a complex interaction of many factors. Therefore, in order to understand what accounts for the higher rates of IPV among Black Americans we need to utilize models that consider multiple risk factors (West, 2016c).

Accordingly, the purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief overview of IPV among African Americans, define historical trauma and structural violence, and describe an ecological model that recognizes how historical trauma and current structural inequalities contribute to individual, relationship, community, and societal risk factors to elevate relationship violence among African Americans. In the final section, I will offer suggestions for a more comprehensive ecological model.

Overview of IPV, historical trauma, and structural violence

In this section, I will define IPV and discuss the prevalence rates of IPV among African Americans. According to scholars, "one way that the traumatizing effects of slavery may continue to play out in the African American family system is through the presence of interpersonal violence between family members" (Al'Uqdah et al., 2016, p. 877). Therefore, I will define historical trauma and structural violence.

Intimate partner violence

Defining what constitutes IPV is challenging and complex; however, a comprehensive definition includes *physical aggression*, ranging from less injurious violence, such as slapping and shoving, to more lethal forms of violence, including beatings and assaults with weapons. *Rape* can take the form of completed or attempted alcohol- or drug-facilitated forced anal, oral, or digital penetration. Other forms of sexual violence include *reproductive coercion* (e.g., pressuring a woman to become pregnant against her wishes, preventing her from using birth control), *sexual coercion* (e.g., unwanted penetration obtained through nonphysical pressure), and *unwanted sexual contact* (e.g., kissing, fondling). Examples of *psychological aggression* includes name-calling, insulting, or humiliating, and coercive control includes behaviors that are intended to monitor, control, or threaten an intimate partner. Finally, *stalking* encompasses the victim's being the recipient of unwanted communication via email or through social media or being watched or followed at home, work, or school. These forms of violence can occur in any intimate partnership and can be perpetrated by legal or common-law spouses, boyfriends/girlfriends, cohabitating, dating, or casual sexual partners (Smith et al., 2017).

The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) is an ongoing, nationally representative random-digit-dial telephone survey that collects information about experiences of sexual violence, IPV, and stalking among noninstitutionalized English- and Spanish-speaking adults (9,086 women and 7,421 men) in the United States. Based on the NISVS, Black women reported a broad range of IPV victimization: 41 percent had been physically assaulted, 14.6 percent had been stalked, and 12.2 percent had been raped by an intimate partner during their lifetime. Too few Black men reported rape and stalking by an intimate partner to produce reliable prevalence estimates; however, 36.8 percent of Black men reported physical aggression that was perpetrated by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Breiding et al., 2014).

Historical trauma and structural violence

During 250 years of slavery, followed by 90 years of de facto and de jure segregation in the form of Jim Crow[2] laws, and the shameful incompletion of the modern civil rights movement, one thing remained constant in the lives of African Americans: high levels of interpersonal and institutional violence in the forms of beatings, rapes, reproductive coercion,

and lynchings. *Historical trauma*, which also has been referred to as *post-traumatic slave syndrome* (Degruy, 2017) and *segregation stress syndrome* (Thompson-Miller et al., 2015), has been defined as "the collective spiritual, psychological, emotional and cognitive distress perpetuated intergenerationally deriving from multiple denigrating experiences originating with slavery and continuing with pattern forms of racism and discrimination to the present day" (Williams-Washington, 2010, p. 32).

This is not to suggest that every destructive act, including the perpetration of interpersonal violence, is the direct result of slavery. Exposure to racism, quality of their social support system, and knowledge of these historical events can determine how contemporary African Americans experience historical trauma. Still, slavery and its aftermath have left an indelible mark on the Black psyche and consciousness and have hindered the ability of some African Americans to develop healthy interpersonal relationships (Dixon, 2017; Williams-Washington, 2010).

Beyond the psychological consequences of historical trauma, racial discrimination has created structural inequalities, in the form of higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and residential segregation, that have increased the probability that Black Americans will experience all forms of violence in their families and communities. Thus, in order to capture the full range of violence that is experienced by Black Americans, an ecological model of IPV risk factors needs to include a discussion of *institutional racism*, which comprises unfair polices and discriminatory practices of particular institutions that have a disparate impact on people of color. Relatedly, *structural racism* is the cumulative and compounding effects of an array of societal factors, including the history, culture, ideology, and interactions of institutions and policies that systematically privilege White people and disadvantage people of color (for a discussion see West, 2016b, 2016c).

Ecological model

> The issue of IPV in the African American community is large and complex. IPV is not attributable to one singular cause, but it is a product of multiple factors.
>
> *(Al'Uqdah et al., 2016, p. 880)*

In order to understand what accounts for the higher rates of IPV among Black Americans, we need to utilize theories that consider multiple risk factors, such as an ecological model that explores risk factors at four levels (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). At the individual level, researchers explore how a person's sociodemographic characteristics, such as social class or gender; and formative history, including exposure to childhood abuse and substance use, increase their risk of IPV. The relationship level considers the interactions between the survivor and their abusive partner, family members, and peers, whereas the community level examines the environment in which the person lives: for example, exposure to community violence and poverty. Finally, the ecological model includes larger societal-level factors, such as norms, policies, and structural inequalities, including racism and sexism (for a more detailed application of the ecological model to African American IPV see West, 2016c).

There are several benefits of using an ecological model. Researchers have persuasively argued that, when individuals live with multiple community disadvantages that have their foundations in historical and structural racism, their frustration and anger can spill over into intimate relationships and culminate in interpersonal violence, including homicide. Thus, an ecological model moves us beyond viewing victimization as an abnormality or personal defect that resides within the individual survivor or within an abusive relationship. Instead, an

ecological model compels us to consider the structural inequalities and the context in which the survivor and the couple exist (West, 2016c).

Below, I will discuss individual-level (e.g., age, gender, income, alcohol use/abuse, and childhood victimization), relationship-level (e.g., relationship conflict; peer/family networks), community-level (e.g., neighborhood poverty and community violence), and societal-level risk factors, including experiences with racial discrimination (see Table 15.1). Although each level will be discussed separately, it is difficult to detangle the interrelated individual-, relationship-, community-, and societal-level correlates and risk factors associated with violence among African Americans. For example, the combination of attitudes supporting IPV (individual-level), inadequate conflict resolution skills (relationship-level), and exposure to neighborhood violence (community-level) converge to increase the risk that low-income, urban Black men will assault their intimate partners (Raiford et al., 2013).

According to Al'Uqdah and colleagues (2016),

> slavery is directly responsible for the social, political, and historical remnants of racism that mediates the impact of environmental risk factors (e.g., disadvantage neighborhoods) and individual risk factors (e.g., low SES and unemployment) contributing to IPV in the African American community.
>
> *(p. 880)*

Accordingly, throughout I will weave information about how historical trauma and structural inequalities influence risk factors at each of the levels.

Individual-level risk factors

Age

Partner victimization occurs most frequently among younger individuals and couples. In the National Family Violence Resurvey (NFVR), the rates of severe IPV were more than three times greater among Black couples who were under age 30 when compared with Black couples who were 40 years or older (Hampton & Gelles, 1994). Younger age, more specifically being between 25 and 34 years old, was associated with more recent physical IPV in a sample of Black battered women in Baltimore (Stockman et al., 2014).

Gender

On one hand, it appears that unidirectional female-to-male partner violence (FMPV) is more frequently reported than unidirectional male-to-female partner violence (MFPV) among Black couples in the National Longitudinal Couples Survey (NCLS), which interviewed both members of the couple in 1995 and 2000. In the 1995 survey, Black couples more frequently reported FMPV than MFPV (30 percent vs. 23 percent). Almost one-third of Black wives used minor or moderate physical aggression against their husbands, such as throwing something; pushing, shoving, and grabbing; and hitting with something (Caetano et al., 2000). However, when the Black couples were resurveyed in 2000, they reported comparable rates of male-to-female partner and female-to-male partner minor physical assault (15 percent vs. 16 percent, respectively) and severe physical aggression MFPV and FMPV (e.g., beat up or choked; 4 percent vs. 6 percent, respectively; Caetano et al., 2009).

Table 15.1 Summary of risk factors associated with violence among African Americans by ecological level

Risk factors	*Research findings*
Individual level	
Age	• Rates of severe IPV[1] were more than three times greater among Black couples under age 30 (Hampton & Gelles, 1994) • Younger age, between 25 and 34 years old, was associated with more recent physical IPV in a sample of Black battered women in Baltimore (Stockman et al., 2014).
Gender	• Black couples (61 percent) reported a pattern of bidirectional physical violence (Caetano et al., 2005) • Black couples more frequently reported FMPV[2] than MFPV[3] (30 percent vs. 23 percent, respectively; Caetano et al., 2000). • Black women were murdered by males at a rate of 2.43 per 100,000 (Violence Policy Center, 2017) • Black women reported higher rates of rape and stalking than Black men (Black et al., 2011) • Among Black couples, the overall rate of MFSA[4] was 23.2 percent (Ramisetty-Mikler et al., 2007)
Income	• Black couples who reported MFPV had lower mean annual incomes ($22,838) than those couples who did not report MFPV ($32,685; Cunradi et al., 2002) • Black couples who reported FMPV had lower mean annual incomes ($23,238) than those couples who did not report FMPV ($33,541; Cunradi et al., 2002)
Alcohol use/abuse	• Black couples with male alcohol problems were at a sevenfold risk for MFPV compared with those without male alcohol problems (Cunradi et al., 1999) • Black couples reporting female alcohol problems had a fivefold risk for MFPV compared with those without female alcohol problems (Cunradi et al., 1999) • Black women in the heaviest drinking category were twice as likely to report FMPV than abstainers and infrequent drinkers (Caetano et al., 2000)
Childhood victimization	• Black couples in which the female reported childhood violence victimization were more likely to report MFPV than couples in which the female did not report victimization (Cunradi et al., 1999) • Blacks who were hit as a teenager by their mother or observed parental violence had higher rates of husband-to-wife violence (Hampton & Gelles, 1994) • Blacks who were hit as a teenager by either parent were twice as likely to be in households with severe IPV (Hampton & Gelles, 1994)

Relationship level		
Relationship conflict	•	Nearly two-thirds of non-felony related homicides (168 out of 268) involved arguments between the Black female victim and male offender (Violence Policy Center, 2017)
	•	The rates of IPV perpetration increased as attitudes supporting IPV increased among Black men who reported high ineffective couple conflict resolution skills (Raiford et al., 2013)
Peer/family networks	•	Black couples who had been in the community less than two years reported twice the rate of minor violence (Hampton & Gelles, 1994).
	•	Perpetration of IPV was associated with gang involvement (Reed et al., 2009).
Community level		
Neighborhood poverty	•	The risk for MFPV was threefold higher among Black couples who lived in impoverished neighborhoods compared with those not living in poor areas (Cunradi et al., 2000)
	•	The risk for FMPV was twofold higher among Black couples who lived in impoverished neighborhoods compared with those not living in poor areas (Cunradi et al., 2000)
Neighborhood violence	•	Community violence was correlated with emotional dating victimization among young black urban women (Stueve & O'Donnell, 2008)
	•	Perception that neighborhood violence was frequent, personal involvement in street violence, and gang violence were associated with IPV perpetration among urban Black men (Reed et al., 2009)
Societal level		
Racialdiscrimination	•	Experiencing racial discrimination was a predictor of physical and emotional IPV victimization and perpetration among young, low-income, urban African American women (Stueve & O'Donnell, 2008)
	•	Black men who reported high rates of racial discrimination perpetrated IPV in their current relationship when compared with those who reported less discrimination (28 percent vs. 16 percent) (Reed et al., 2010)

1 IPV = intimate partner violence
2 FMPV = female-to-male partner violence
3 MFPV = male-to-female partner violence
4 MFSA = male-to-female sexual aggression

Another important violent relationship pattern was the high frequency of mutual or bidirectional IPV. Among Black couples, the rate of bidirectional partner violence is twice that of unidirectional FMPV and approximately six times higher than unidirectional MFPV. Specifically, 61 percent of Black couples reported that both partners had used physical aggression, and one-third of mutually violent Black couples described it as severe. At resurvey, 17 percent of these Black couples continued to engage in mutual violence, and 11 percent of those couples progressed into severe IPV (Caetano et al., 2005).

Although, Black women utilized minor and moderate physical aggression against intimate partners and were participants in mutually violent relationships, it is important to put these findings into context. First, Black women's use of physical aggression often occurs in the context of their victimization. For example, they may be using aggression as a form of self-defense, in retaliation for past abuse, or to preempt future abuse. Therefore, Black women may not be the primary aggressors. Second, bidirectional violence does not mean that women's and men's violent acts are equivalent. When motives, frequency, and severity of violence are considered, the negative physical and mental health consequences that are associated with IPV are often greater for women, including injuries and levels of fear (see West, 2007 for a discussion).

To further illuminate the gendered nature of IPV, when compared with Black men and women of other ethnic groups, Black women were overrepresented among victims of certain forms of sexual violence. Among Black couples, the overall rate of male-to-female sexual assault (MFSA) was 23.2 percent, which most commonly involved pressuring the partner (without the use of physical force) to engage in sexual intercourse, often without a condom. Although categorized as "minor," this form of sexual coercion frequently occurred in conjunction with psychological abuse and physical violence (Ramisetty-Mikler et al., 2007).

In addition, in semistructured interviews conducted at health clinics, when compared with White women (17 percent), African American women (44 percent) reported higher rates of reproductive coercion (Borrero et al., 2015). Regarding specific types of reproductive coercion, more than one-half (54.6 percent) of the Black women surveyed at family planning clinics reported intimate partner victimization, and one-quarter of these victims experienced reproductive coercion, including pregnancy coercion (e.g., "tried to force or pressure you to become pregnant") and birth control sabotage (e.g., "taking off the condom while you were having sex so you would become pregnant"; Miller et al., 2010). In both interviews (Borrero et al., 2015) and surveys (Miller et al., 2010), Black women reported that their current or a past pregnancy resulted directly from birth control sabotage and pregnancy pressure from an intimate partner.

African American women also reported severe partner violence, in the form of nonfatal strangulation. More specifically, in semistructured interviews with women survivors who were referred by the police, when compared with White women, Black women were at a higher risk for attempted, completed, and multiple strangulations (Messing et al., 2018). Similarly, in a secondary analysis of data from an 11-city case control study of police and medical examiner records of intimate partner attempted and completed homicides between 1994 and 2000, strangulation was a far more common form of physical abuse for African American women (40 percent) compared with White women (17 percent) and Latinas (22 percent; Glass et al., 2008). This is indicative of the severity of IPV experienced by a disproportionate number of African American women. Nonfatal strangulation was associated with other forms of violence, serious injuries, and lethal violence, including sexual assault, more frequent injuries, loss of consciousness, miscarriage, and a sense of powerlessness (Messing et al., 2018). Moreover,

strangulation also increased the odds that Black women would be the victims of a completed homicide by 4.65 (Glass et al., 2008).

In fact, Black women were more frequently victims of gun violence and lethal IPV. In a retrospective analysis of IPV cases that were reported to the Philadelphia police in 2013, when guns were used, 69.1 percent of abusers used the weapon to threaten or intimidate their partners, and the use of a gun (vs. no weapon) was more common when the victim was Black (Sorenson, 2017). In a disproportionate number of cases, when compared with other racial groups (Whites, American Indians, Hispanics), Black women were victims of homicide, which was most often committed by intimate partners (4.4 per 1,000; Petrosky et al., 2017). Likewise, the Violence Policy Center (2017) found that Black women were murdered by males at a rate more than twice as high as that for White females: 2.43 per 100,000 versus 0.96 per 100,000. Of Black victims who knew their offenders, 58 percent (221 out of 381) were wives or ex-wives (legal or common-law) or girlfriends of the offenders. More than one-half (58 percent) of the Black women were shot and killed with a gun.

To conclude, Black women's use of physical violence against their partners as aggressors and participants in mutual IPV should not be minimized. It is imperative that we recognize African American men as victims of intimate partner abuse (West, 2008). However, when contextualized, it is clear that Black women also suffer high rates of severe IPV in the forms of sexual violence and reproductive coercion (Borrero et al., 2015); attempted, completed, and multiple nonfatal strangulation (Messing et al., 2018); and gun violence and domestic homicide (Violence Policy Center, 2017). Historical and economic reasons for these gender patterns of IPV among African American couples will be discussed in the relationship level of the ecological model.

Income/employment status

Annual household income had the greatest relative influence on the probability of partner violence, with lower incomes being associated with higher rates of IPV. Specifically, Black couples reporting either MFPV or FMPV had significantly lower mean annual incomes than nonviolent couples (Cunradi et al., 2002). Relatedly, households with unemployed Black husbands reported the highest rates of husband-to-wife abuse (Hampton & Gelles, 1994). In fact, Black women were more likely to be murdered by unemployed partners (Campbell et al., 2003), and preliminary estimates appear to suggest that homicide followed by suicide among African American men increased in times of economic hardship (Huguet & Lewis-Laietmark, 2015).

Overall, African Americans have less wealth than their White counterparts. Several key factors exacerbate this vicious cycle of wealth disparities—long history of employment discrimination; discrimination in home loan practices, which has resulted in lower rates of homeownership; and persistent labor market discrimination in the form of lower wages. Thus, despite positive factors such as increased education level, African Americans have less access to stable jobs, good wages, and retirement benefits (Hanks et al., 2018), which in turn increases the probability that they will experience IPV as victims or perpetrators.

Alcohol use and abuse

There is substantial evidence that alcohol-related dependency indicators (e.g., withdrawal symptoms and alcohol tolerance), alcohol-related social problems (e.g., job loss, legal problems), and greater mean male and female alcohol consumption were especially strong

predictors of IPV among African American couples, independent of who in the couple reports the problem (Cunradi et al., 1999). In addition, Black women in the heaviest drinking category were twice as likely to report FMPV when compared with abstainers and infrequent drinkers (Caetano et al., 2000). When faced with extreme, persistent, economic and social inequalities, individuals are more likely to use and abuse alcohol or drugs (West, 2016c).

Exposure to childhood victimization

Childhood victimization in the form of observing violence between parents/caregivers or experiencing childhood physical abuse was associated with subsequent partner violence. For example, in the NCLS, Black couples in which the female reported childhood violence victimization were more likely to report MFPV than couples in which the female did not report child abuse (Cunradi et al., 1999), and Black children who experienced serious childhood or adolescent victimization in their homes, such as beatings and threats with weapons, were more likely to engage in both male- and female-perpetrated IPV in adulthood (Caetano et al., 2000). In the NFVR, Black respondents who were hit as a teenager by their mothers or who observed parental violence in their families of origin had statistically higher rates of husband-to-wife violence during adulthood, and those who were hit as a teen by either parent were twice as likely to experience severe IPV as adults in the year prior to the survey (Hampton & Gelles, 1994).

Child physical abuse and harsh corporal punishment are not unique to African American families. However, according to the 2014 Child Maltreatment Report by the U.S. Children's Bureau, child abuse has declined since 2009, but rates among Black Americans remain higher than among their White and Hispanic counterparts. Black children had the highest rates of victimization at 15.3 per 1,000 children, compared with 8.8 per 1,000 of Hispanics and 8.4 per 1,000 of Whites (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, Administration on Children, Youth & Families, Children's Bureau., 2016). Patton (2017) makes the compelling argument that the parenting practices of using harsh physical discipline have their origins in slavery:

> Slave parents whupped their young to prepare them for the harsh realities of plantation life and to protect them from abuse at the hands of masters, overseers, and other whites who only valued black life as a means of profit. During Jim Crow whupping was used as a survival tactic to teach black children proper racial etiquette so they would not risk being beaten or lynched by whites.
>
> *(p. 13)*

Long after this kind of punishment lost its relevance as a survival tactic on plantations and during the racial terror of the Jim Crow era, the punishment and trauma continue to be reinforced by biblical teaching, characterized as an act of love by many Black parents, and enacted across generations (Patton, 2017). As the research suggests, being the victim of childhood abuse has been associated with higher rates of adult partner aggression as both victims and perpetrators.

To conclude, although discussed separately, the associations among individual-level risk factors and IPV is complex. According to social structure theory:

> those from lower SES strata may have had greater exposure to childhood violence, have higher rates of depression, experience more alcohol-related problems, have poorer coping

> mechanisms, and more commonly endorse the use of physical aggression as a tactic in marital disputes.
>
> *(Cunradi et al., 2002, p. 386)*

Relationship-level risk factors

Relationship conflict

Relationship conflict and arguments have been associated with elevated rates of IPV among African American couples. For example, in a low-income sample of urban African American men, when compared with men who had better conflict resolution skills, the association between attitudes supporting IPV and IPV perpetration was greater among men who reported high ineffective couple conflict resolution skills (e.g., "You and your partner's arguments are left hanging and unsettled," "You and your partner go for days being made at each other"; Raiford et al., 2013).

Some of this relationship conflict may be centered around economic disparities and gender roles within the household. Among Black couples, the rate of bidirectional partner violence is twice that of unidirectional FMPV and approximately six times higher than unidirectional MFPV (Caetano et al., 2005). The authors speculated that economics may play a role:

> because Black women have historically made substantial contributions to the economic well-being of Black households, they may be less likely to tolerate relationships with violent partners without retaliating or engaging in defensive violence, thereby increasing the likelihood of situations where both members of the couples commit violence against one another.
>
> *(Caetano et al., 2005, p. 401)*

Economic factors may also fuel Black men's use of IPV. In particular, many Black men have been unable to fulfill their traditional gender role of family provider, primarily owing to discrimination in the labor market. As a result, "interpersonal conflicts arise between black males and black females because many black males are aware of their role failures and are inclined to counterattack any perceived challenge to their manhood with violence" (Hampton & Gelles, 1994, p. 115).

Historical records appear to support this conjecture. Using lengthy police interviews with witnesses, killers, and, occasionally, dying victims in early twentieth-century New Orleans, Adler (2015) found that, "the combination of low wages for Black men and high rates of employment for Black women weakened men's economic power within the family" (p. 31). When compared with other racial groups, domestic homicides more often occurred when African American men attempted to rein in a defiant partner and reestablish dominance in the household, and African American women killed their partners in self-defense or in defiance of the men's efforts to control them. One African American woman explained that, "she often thought, 'What's the use of havin' a fussin' man around when you're earning you own livin' anyway?'" (Adler, 2015, p. 27).

Peer/family networks

Although the research is sparse in this area, it appears that peer and family networks can be risk factors for IPV. In particular, in the NFVR, Black couples who had been in the community less than two years reported twice the rate of minor violence. Limited access to

social support may explain this finding (Hampton & Gelles, 1994). In a sample of low-income, urban African American men having violent peers, and more specifically being involved in a street gang, was associated with physical violence that was perpetrated against an intimate partner (Reed et al., 2009).

Community-level risk factors

According to literature reviews, research suggests that the characteristics of the neighborhood influence rates of IPV, such as concentrated neighborhood disadvantage. That is, over and above what would be expected based on individual-level factors, individuals living in neighborhoods and communities with high unemployment, low average incomes, and higher proportions of households with children have been found to be at increased risk of IPV (Beyer et al., 2015). Community violence also has been associated with intimate partner victimization and perpetration (e.g., Stueve & O'Donnell, 2008). These complex interactions will be discussed below.

Neighborhood disadvantage

Regardless of the population that was surveyed or the measure used to assess concentrated neighborhood disadvantage (e.g., percentage of residents who lived below the poverty line or received public assistance, unemployment rates, number of vacant homes), individuals and couples who lived in the most resource-limited neighborhoods reported the highest rates of IPV (Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012). A disproportionate number of African American families live in economically distressed communities, which in turn is associated with relationship aggression. In the NCLS, nearly one-half (47 percent) of the Black couples in the sample resided in impoverished areas, and those residents were at a threefold risk for MFPV and a twofold increase for FMPV when compared with Black couples who did not reside in poor areas (Cunradi et al., 2000). More recently, using data from adolescents in Toledo, Ohio, and the 2000 Census, researchers found that higher levels of concentrated neighborhood disadvantage were associated with higher odds of IPV perpetration, and that Blacks lived in significantly more disadvantaged neighborhoods than their White counterparts (Copp et al., 2015).

The combination of various individual-level risk factors and neighborhood disadvantage seems to elevate the risk of IPV. For example, individual economic distress in the form of low household income and residence in economically resource-limited neighborhoods work in tandem to increase women's risk for inflicting and sustaining IPV (Cunradi et al., 2000, 2002). As previously discussed, general population studies have provided substantial evidence that alcohol-related dependence indicators, alcohol-related social problems, and greater mean male and female alcohol consumption were especially strong predictors of IPV among African American couples (Cunradi et al., 1999). At the community level, as the density of alcohol outlets increases in the neighborhood, so too does the risk of MFPV, particularly among couples with alcohol-related problems (McKinney et al., 2009).

In addition, higher rates of IPV were associated with individual-level risk factors, such as experiences of negative emotions, a history of childhood abuse, and subjective perceptions of neighborhood disadvantage. For example, researchers found an association between IPV perpetration among adolescents in Toledo, particularly if the participant experienced high rates of anger, and to a lesser extent depression, when they perceived high rates of neighborhood disorder (e.g., the extent to which their neighborhood was characterized by "litter or trash in the streets," "quarrels in which someone is badly hurt," and "drug use or drug dealing

in the open") (Copp et al., 2015). In a sample of low-income African American women in Atlanta, at high levels of perceived neighborhood disorder, the probability of being physically abused as an adult steadily increased if the victim also reported high rates of emotional childhood abuse (Obasaju et al., 2009).

Community violence

Exposure to community violence in any role (witness, victim, or perpetrator) has been associated with higher rates of intimate partner abuse. For example, exposure to community violence (e.g., hearing gun shots, seeing drug deals, seeing someone beaten up or killed) was a predictor of emotional IPV victimization among low-income African American adolescent women (Stueve & O'Donnell, 2008). As further evidence, Black men were more likely to batter their girlfriends if they had been involved in street violence, had a history of gang involvement, or perceived that there was a "great deal" of violence in their neighborhood (Reed et al., 2009). Moreover, all these forms of violence can converge to create a web of trauma and violence. For instance, using a sample of low-income African American adolescents, Kennedy (2008) found that exposure to community violence (e.g., getting beaten up in the neighborhood) was associated with witnessing adult-on-adult family violence, being the victim of physical abuse by a parent or adult caregiver, and being the victim of dating violence.

Endorsement of attitudes that support violence appears to converge with exposure to community violence to further elevate the rates of relationship aggression. As well as holding personal beliefs that IPV is sometimes justifiable, African American women in Baltimore who perceived IPV-tolerant community attitudes (e.g., relationship violence was "occasionally" or "always okay") reported higher rates of intimate partner physical and psychological violence (Stockman et al., 2014). Regarding perpetration, the association between attitudes supporting IPV and actual aggression against a partner was greater among low-income, urban African American men with high exposure to neighborhood violence than among men with low exposure to neighborhood violence (Raiford et al., 2013). Thus, "a higher threshold for violence in a community can also normalize the use of violence and provide opportunities to consort with others that support the use of violence, thereby producing violent male networks that increase individual risk for perpetration" (Raiford et al., 2013, p. 790).

Historical and structural factors have created this current racialized, concentrated neighborhood disadvantage, which in turn has increased the probability of relationship and exposure to community violence. Desmond (2016) noted that, during enslavement, African Americans toiled on the land without compensation, and, during the reconstruction period, they were denied access to land ownership. During the Jim Crow era, racial terrorism and lynchings in the South fueled the great migration to northern cities where extreme residential segregation forced Blacks into urban ghettos or under-resourced, distressed communities that were characterized by substandard housing and elevated rates of crimes. As a result, even in contemporary times, "African Americans live in the shadow of a history of segregation and hostility from a dominant white culture that even the poorest whites never experience" (Benson et al., 2004, p. 339).

Societal-level risk factors

Exposure to racial discrimination

Discrimination as measured by items such as being followed by security guards when shopping, being followed, arrested, or stopped by police, and being called insulting names

related to skin color or race has been linked to IPV victimization and perpetration in samples of young, low-income, urban African Americans. For example, experiencing a recent incident of discrimination has been associated with physical and emotional IPV victimization among Black women (Stueve & O'Donnell, 2008). Above and beyond the influence of socioeconomic status, slightly more than one-quarter (28 percent) of Black men who reported high discrimination scores also reported perpetrating IPV in their current relationship, compared with only 16 percent of men who reported lower discrimination scores. Researchers speculated "that male disempowerment (as a result of racial discrimination and marginalization) may result in a desire to demonstrate masculine identity and status within the context of female intimate relationships as well as within the community" (Reed et al., 2010, p. 323).

It should be noted that cross-sectional research is unable to establish the temporal sequence of discrimination and IPV; therefore, we cannot conclude that experiences with racial discrimination cause IPV perpetration or victimization. Still, it is important to investigate how Black male–female relationships are negatively impacted by this form of racial trauma. It is possible that discrimination is a stressor that gets acted out as aggression within intimate relationships.

To conclude, in this section, I have reviewed the research on individual-level (age, gender, income, alcohol use/abuse, and childhood victimization), relationship-level (relationship conflict, peer/family network), community-level (neighborhood poverty and community violence), and societal-level (experiences with racial discrimination) risk factors among African American individuals and couples. Although each risk factor was discussed separately, there are complex interactions between and among the ecological levels and the various risk factors. For example, the pathways between economic marginalization and higher rates of partner violence are complex. According to social structure theory,

> those from lower SES strata may have had greater exposure to childhood violence, have higher rates of depression, experience more alcohol-related problems, have poorer coping mechanisms, and more commonly endorse the use of physical aggression as a tactic in marital disputes.
>
> *(Cunradi et al., 2002, p. 386)*

Going forward, "we must expand our methodological toolboxes to include approaches and analyses that are suited to multilevel and system-oriented investigations and that better align with an ecological orientation" (Shaw et al., 2016, p. 36).

Toward a more comprehensive ecological model

Regarding future research directions, it is imperative that scholars strive to create a more robust, comprehensive ecological model that considers historical trauma and contemporary structural inequalities. In addition, it is important to use an intersectional analysis to investigate how individual demographic risk factors, such as ethnicity/immigration status, age, and social class, interact to influence rates of IPV among African Americans. At the relationship level, a more comprehensive ecological model could consider relationship status, IPV within sexual minority relationships, violent peer networks, and relationship conflict. Finally, at the community level, there is a need to create more complex models that investigate how neighborhoods and communities shape IPV, and how social policies (societal-level) inadvertently increase the risk of violence among marginalized groups.

Individual-level risk factors

Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1994) to describe overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination, as well as privilege and power. The premise is simple:

> It is fallacious to suppose that one experiences abuse first as a human being, then as a woman, then as a black person, then as a lesbian, and so forth. A woman's responses cannot be correlated to aspects of her social identity on a neat flowchart.
>
> *(West, 1999, p. 56)*

Alternatively stated, there is rich demographic diversity among Black Americans. In order to make these subpopulations more visible, it is important to use an intersectional analysis that considers the victims' social location in terms of ethnicity/immigration status, age, and social class (for a visual representation of how intersectionality influences ethnically diverse victims of IPV, see Lockhart & Mitchell, 2010).

Ethnicity/immigration status

In light of the increased immigrant population from African and Caribbean nations, researchers must focus on heterogeneity among Blacks and the unique risk factors that they face based on ethnicity and immigration status. For example, African immigrant women may have to contend with challenges around language barriers and gender roles (West, 2016a), and, when compared with US-born African American women, Black women of Caribbean descent experience different demographic risk factors for severe IPV victimization (Lacey et al., 2016).

Age

As previously discussed, age is a risk factor for IPV, with younger couples and individuals being at greater risk (Hampton & Gelles, 1994). However, at the other end of the age continuum, older African American women may be financially abused by their adult children and physically and emotionally abused by their spouses. We need more research on the factors that make this population uniquely vulnerable to family violence (Paranjape et al., 2009).

Social class

Much of the IPV research focuses on lower-income African Americans, which makes sense because of their elevated risk. However, middle- and upper-middle-class Black couples are not immune to relationship aggression. In fact, the risk factors may vary across social class. Among upper-income Blacks, witnessing maternal violence as a child and being hit as a teen by a father increased the risk of IPV, whereas endorsing wife slapping and husband's education level predicted future IPV among lower-income Blacks (Hampton & Gelles, 1994). These differences should be investigated in future research.

Relationship-level risk factors

Future scholars should utilize an ecological model that considers the following risk factors for IPV: relationships status of Black couples, challenges faced in sexual minority relationships, the role of violent family/peer networks, and relationship conflict.

Relationship status

Because of historical factors, African Americans have had lower rates of marriage and higher rates of divorce and are more likely to be in unstable cohabitation relationships (Adler, 2015; Awosan & Opara, 2016), which have been linked to relationship abuse. For example, in a national study, being separated and divorced were risk factors for severe violence among African American women (Lacey et al., 2016). In a Baltimore sample, when compared with victims who had never lived with their partners, those who had a history of cohabitation reported a higher risk of domestic partner homicide (Sabri et al., 2014). Thus, it is important that future ecological models consider relationship aggression in all legal and common-law partnerships.

Sexual minority relationships

The bulk of the IPV research has focused on heterosexual relationships. There is a great need to create models that acknowledge the unique challenges experienced by sexual minorities. When compared with Black women who only had sex with men, bisexual Black women, who had sex with both men and women, reported higher rates of reproductive coercion and a greater number of lifetime intimate partner physical and sexual violence experiences (Alexander et al., 2016). Furthermore, Black women (Hill et al., 2012) and Black men (Wu et al., 2015) in same-sex relationships may face multiple, intersecting forms of oppression (racialized, classist sexism, and heterosexism), which are believed to be risk factors for IPV.

Violent family/peer networks

It is imperative that we investigate the ways that violent peer and family networks socialize individuals and couples to enact violence in their personal relationships. In semistructured interviews with economically disadvantaged African American adolescents, almost two-thirds (64 percent) experienced or perpetrated IPV within their own dating relationships. In addition, they reported witnessed IPV among siblings and extended family members (e.g., cousins, aunts, uncles; 59 percent), parents and step-parents (27 percent), friends (23 percent), and neighbors (18 percent). Alternatively stated, participants experienced and witnessed IPV in at least one relationship context, 36 percent reported violence exposure across two relationship contexts, and 27 percent across three relationship contexts (Landor et al., 2017). Likewise, Kennedy (2008) found that the prevalence of exposure to community violence, witnessing adult-on-adult family violence, experiencing physical abuse by a parent or adult caregiver, and IPV victimization, much of it severe, within a sample of urban Black high school students is quite high and thus concluded that, "as an ecological perspective suggests, youths' experiences within one context are connected to their experiences in other contexts" (p. 36).

Relationship conflict

Regarding relationship-level risk factors, there is a need to understand the sources of relationship conflict and how this discord contributes to subsequent relationship violence. Among Black women, when the level of relationship trust decreased, as measured by a woman's perception that her partner is honest, trustworthy, and sincere, the odds of being the victim of reproductive coercion increased (Paterno et al., in press). Understanding these findings

requires scholars to investigate the myriad ways that historical, structural, and contemporary problems can lead to conflict in heterosexual male–female relationships:

> The imbalance in gender educational attainment, unequal sex ratio, gender socialization in the mate-selection process, substantial rates of unemployment and underemployment among Black men, and the shortage of marriageable men may breed power struggles, distrust, resentment, disappointment, and frustration due to unmet expectations between Black men and women.
>
> *(Awosan & Opara, 2016, pp. 34–35)*

Community-level risk factors

Regarding community-level risk factors, there is a need to consider geographic location and to create more complex models that investigate how neighborhoods and communities shape IPV.

Geographic location

Based on literature reviews, there is a general consensus that neighborhood factors influence violence that occurs between partners (Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012). However, much of the IPV research focuses on African Americans who live in urban communities. Although the research is limited, it appears that the types of abuse, location of the assault, and response to IPV varies between urban and rural African American couples. For example, rural woman were more likely to be attacked with kitchen knives and pieces of furniture, whereas, urban women were assaulted with guns. Urban women reported that their abuse occurred in public places, such as shopping malls and gas stations; in contrast, rural women were beaten in private settings, including houses and apartments. Furthermore, the way the abusers controlled the lives of women in the two settings differed. Urban abusers told the victim how to wear her hair and/or how to dress, whereas rural abusers battered their partners for failing to perform domestic duties, such as cooking and cleaning (Bhandari et al., 2015). It would be fruitful to investigate these differences.

Complex models

Voith (in press) demonstrates how a well-defined, integrative theoretical framework can enhance the current understanding of ecological research into IPV. In particular, we need to consider macro-level factors (e.g., socioeconomic and political context, and IPV intervention norms), exo-level factors (e.g., social environment and physical environment), and meso-level factors (e.g., social capital, economic capital, and collective efficacy). All these levels interact in complex ways: "Lack of social networks in a neighborhood may reduce trust among community members. Mistrust diminishes residents' collective ability to manage criminal activity, that is, collective efficacy (mesolevel), and ultimately lead to higher rates of IPV (microlevel)" (Voith, in press, p. 2).

Societal-level risk factors

Currently, there is a dearth of research on how societal-level risk factors influence IPV among African American families. In addition to the link between exposure to racial discrimination and IPV (e.g., Stueve & O'Donnell, 2008), it would be beneficial to explore how social

policies inadvertently increase the risk of violence among marginalized groups. For example, when welfare benefits are slashed, more African American men are killed by their female partners. Perhaps having economic resources in the form of public assistance would enable impoverished Black women to leave abusers before the violence escalates to homicide (Dugan et al., 2003).

Conclusion

Racial disparities in IPV among African Americans have been investigated through the lens of a multiple-disadvantage model, which makes sense give the disproportionate risk factors that this population experiences (Cheng & Lo, 2015). However, a comprehensive ecological model should consider protective factors as well. For example, appreciating one's African American racial identity and having a strong sense of racial pride predicted less-approving attitudes toward IPV and greater willingness to help victims of violence (Blackmon et al., 2016). Religious involvement, specifically church attendance, protects against domestic violence, and this protective effect is stronger for African American men and women. Religious congregations can be a source of both formal and informal support for their members and may reduce factors known to be correlated with domestic violence, such as problem drinking, social isolation, and depression (Ellison et al., 2007). However, protective factors and resilience cannot be "isolated from the systems in which the individual is embedded that have shaped his or her experiences, history, and opportunities from birth" (Shaw et al., 2016, p. 36).

Working within an ecological model, it is imperative that relationships, communities, and the larger social structures promote resilience among individuals and create protective factors to reduce relationship abuse. If we use a more comprehensive ecological model, which considers historical trauma, structural violence and inequalities, as well as protective factors and resilience, the interventions that we begin, whether at the individual, relationship, or community level, will have a rippling effect across all systems.

Notes

1 The terms *African American* and *Black* will be used interchangeably in this chapter.
2 Jim Crow was the name of a character in a plantation song in the American South. The name was used to refer to a series of racist laws and measures, enacted between 1876 and 1965, that discriminated against African Americans, made it difficult for them to vote, and forced them to use separate restaurants and bathrooms (Thompson-Miller et al., 2015).

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The Routledge International Handbook of Violence Studies

Edited by
Walter S. DeKeseredy, Callie Marie Rennison, and Amanda K. Hall-Sanchez

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-1-138-28344-2 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-27026-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon, UK