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Advancing the Study of Violence Against Women

Response to Commentaries and Next Steps

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With appreciation for both their dissent and agreement, I read the commentaries on the main article of this symposium on advancing the study of violence against women (VAW). Campbell, Ford, Basile, and Martin all shared different perspectives and emphases in their commentaries, but there is a strikingly consistent theme across all of the four responses and the article: There are weaknesses in the study of VAW, and those limitations keep us from offering what we should to this field. For this author, that there is such agreement and that this sentiment echoes the same point made by previous reviews during the past two decades give compelling reason to proffer the big ideas found within the article.

In addition to agreeing on the existence of weakness, there is little disagreement on the nature of those flaws: the lack of rigor in research methodologies, lack of organization in the literature, lack of infrastructure support, dearth of theory, and more. David Ford rightly points out, as I did in the article, that previous research agendas offered by the National Research Council and the National Institute of Justice have also attended to issues of research rigor, but their fine analyses have not fostered the changes they proposed. Sandra Martin echoes the need for transdisciplinary research teams built around centers of excellence, and Kathleen Basile concurs that silos of researchers are a detriment. Rebecca Campbell agrees with the value of translational research and articulates an important emphasis on authentic, equal partnerships between researchers and advocates.

Beyond these areas of agreement, the points of view of the commentaries diverge. A small portion of the disagreement comes from a lack of clarity of what was proposed. The article does not propose establishment of a discipline of study and in fact punctuates that point by asserting that the

move to a science model should not be accomplished by the concentration of all scholars into one discipline, as such a move would defeat the richness that can be derived from different points of view. It is also not practical, as different disciplines play different roles, all critical to the practice side of the field (e.g., psychology, medicine, law).

What is intended by a move to a science model is that disciplines remain but their interaction is advanced. It is argued that a science of VAW offers a unique approach

of unifying distinct disciplines around an organizing framework and in doing so provides the first realistic mechanism for transdisciplinary, not just multidisciplinary research. Related to this, the article does not intend to prohibit specialization of research foci by individual researchers, as a more narrow concentration lends itself to in-depth discovery and nuanced understanding. The fault lies in research approaches that are so constricted as to fail to comprehend the true experiences of women, that although abuse forms may be studied separately (rape or sexual assault, stalking, physical battering), they most often co-occur in the life of a woman. Finally, the article does not portend a singular theory to explain VAW; in fact, it is the extant inadequacy of theory that is problematic. Instead, the proposal calls for the building of a more organized knowledge base, the outcome of which is generation of a range of theory. A science model provides an intellectual framework that does not limit theory development but rather enhances it.

Where the most interesting differences lie between the article and the commentaries is not in the current state of the field but rather in the manner of remedying its weaknesses. The article suggests that prior “research agendas” on VAW, although extremely valuable, fall short in effecting the changes needed in the field if we are to fully undertake the daunting challenge of addressing VAW in all its complexities. It argues for moving beyond agendas to a more transformative approach, that being the conceptualization of the study of VAW as an area of science.

The thoughtful arguments against such a move appear to fall into three categories. The first is that such a label is not needed; what is needed first and foremost is “simply quality research on VAW regardless of its rank in the hierarchy of scientific methods.” In these words, David Ford gives wise counsel that great value should be placed on the rigorousness of research methods. Second, there is a suggestion that current resources (databases and interdisciplinary conferences) do exist to address identified weaknesses. And third, we need to be wary of unintended consequences that could attach to such a move. To certain of these arguments I would agree but respectfully suggest that they are simply not enough. Rigorous research is absolutely needed, but if every individual study were more rigorous, would that translate into improved pedagogy, would the interdisciplinary divide automatically be crossed, and would credibility in national and international academic circles (and increased federal research funding) naturally follow? Although some databases and interdisciplinary conferences do exist, arguably the majority of research presentations and scientific talks are still given in discipline-specific meetings, and existing electronic resources are not integrated or widely utilized. Again, an organizing framework is not available, and in its absence we do not move forward in the giant steps that are needed. So these arguments may be correct, but if we improved individual studies and accessed all available resources, the field would still await transformation.

That there could be unintended consequences of harm to moving to a science model clearly gives pause. In what is raised, however, I do not find reason to end

contemplation of VAW as a science; rather, I find exceptionally valuable characteristics of what that science might look like. For example, Campbell notes concern that moving to a science would make it more difficult to “combine research and action for social change” and that we lose something vital if we undertake a dispassionate approach to studying violence in all its forms. With this I could not agree more. Einstein said, “It is not enough that one should understand science, concern for man himself and his fate must always form the chief interest of all technical endeavors.” If we might forgive him the lack of inclusivity in his language, the point is crucial that the study of VAW has a unique purpose, and we must inextricably tie scientific discovery (understanding VAW) to the lives of the women affected (ending VAW). Campbell articulates it well: “Developing a science, particularly one so unconventional, would require articulating the field’s collective values.” We might find the painful process of attempting to design our own unique area of science as enlightening as the long-term benefit of that outcome.

I conclude with hopes that a conversation has not ended within the pages of this symposium but rather just begun. The analyses and proposals within the article are imperfect, but they are intended to generate spirited debate—not about small changes or incremental improvements but rather about transformation in the field that makes us equal to the extraordinary challenge that confronts us.