



# Reinterpreting Strength and Safety in a Socio-Cultural Context: Dynamics of Domestic Violence and Experiences of Women of Japanese Descent

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Despite the proliferation of research on domestic violence and child abuse in the U.S. over the last two decades, experiences of women of color remain seriously understudied. This community-based study of women of Japanese descent elucidates multiple, interlocking ways in which socio-cultural factors influence their responses to partners' violence, while exposing tensions between the constraints and benefits of culture. The constraints affect physical and emotional well-being as women are pressured to endure violence. Defying cultural proscriptions has its cost, potentially depriving a woman of her cultural integrity and her support system. This article reevaluates current social policy and programs in light of this tension, calling for a new approach that acknowledges culture as a source of strength and support, while recognizing its contribution to women's vulnerability to violence.

There has been increasing evidence that suggests that in relationships where a woman is abused, children are often victimized as well. This increased attention to the connection between child abuse and domestic violence (violence against women by intimate male partners) has prompted a dialogue between advocates, administrators, policymakers, and researchers in the fields of child abuse and domestic violence (Peled, Jaffe, & Edleson, 1995). Despite differences in philosophies and historical mistrust, new partnerships between the two fields have been forged and innovative training and intervention programs are emerging in various parts of the nation (Ganley & Schechter, 1996; Mills, 1998; Peled et al., 1995; Schechter, 1996). In many communities of color, however, the issues of both child abuse and domestic violence remain largely hidden, as does the connection between the two. This paper addresses men's violence against a group of previously under-studied women,

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women of Japanese descent in the U.S., in the hope that an enhanced understanding of the ways in which culture shapes women's experiences of domestic violence would prompt the fields of child abuse and domestic violence to recognize the salience of race, culture, and gender.

Domestic violence cuts across socio-cultural groupings. Yet, women's experiences with domestic violence are differently shaped by their positions in society and cultural memberships. A variety of socio-cultural factors, such as cultural values, practices, attitudes towards women, and minority status, intrinsically influence the ways in which women experience partners' violence, including the meaning a woman may give to a partner's violence and her patterns of coping and help-seeking (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991; Kanuha, 1994; Ho, 1990; Richie, 1996; Wyatt, 1994). The emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses by the perpetrator, family, friends, and their community, as well as the extent to which domestic violence is tolerated, may vary across different socio-cultural groupings (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 1993; Wyatt, 1994). Furthermore, the availability of personal and social options and resources is not equally distributed among different socio-cultural groupings (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991; Kanuha, 1994). Thus, individuals' experiences of domestic violence must be understood in their unique socio-cultural contexts. This community-based study elucidates the effects of socio-cultural contexts on women's experiences of domestic violence.

### *Need for Attention to Socio-Cultural Contexts: A Gap in Research*

Western feminist, socio-political analysis has uncovered the ways in which patriarchy supports, and is reinforced by, men's use of violence against women in general and domestic violence in particular (e.g., Bograd, 1988; Hanmer & Maynard, 1987; Martin, 1981). This analysis has, however, offered a "monocultural analysis of domestic violence (Ho, 1990, p. 131)." Despite the proliferation of research on domestic violence over the last two decades, the experience of domestic violence among women of color in the U.S. remains seriously understudied.

Studies of the prevalence have typically compared the rates of victimization or perpetration of domestic violence among major racial groups in the U.S. (Straus & Smith, 1990; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). These studies have used a standardized measure that was developed without regard for socio-cultural variations in the manifestations and perceptions of domestic violence across people of different socio-cultural backgrounds. In many qualitative studies aimed at understanding women's subjective experiences,

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