A Sociological Analysis of Domestic Violence via *Defending Our Lives*

Domestic violence is a problem that plagues society in numerous ways. It is a problem that lacks proper definition in today’s society, and as a result has many misconceptions regarding the subject. This paper will cover domestic violence in detail, through three main parts. Part one of this essay will discuss the definition of domestic violence, why it is not merely a family problem, but rather a social problem as well, and the extent of the problem in the United States and the consequent impact on US society. Part two of the paper will analyze what an individual hears and sees about domestic violence in regards to the film *Defending Our Lives* in the viewpoint of the symbolic interactionism theory. The final portion of the essay will talk about the battered wife syndrome, and how the courts generally view it. At large, this essay will be useful in analyzing domestic violence, and its sociological impact, consequences and ergo determine what we are doing to appease the problem.

As mentioned in the aforementioned paragraph, part one of this essay will discuss what exactly domestic violence is, and why it is not just a family problem, but a social problem as well. We will also discuss the extent of the problem in the United States, as well as its impact on our society. In order to analyze a subject properly, one must first define it. As stated by the National Domestic Violence Hotline, domestic violence can be defined as “a pattern of coercive control that one person exercises over another.” Typically, the type of domestic violence that comes to mind when the subject is brought up is referred to as battering. Battering, once again as referred to by the National Domestic Violence Hotline, can be defined as “a behavior that physically harms, arouses fear, prevents a partner from doing what they wish or forces them to behave in ways they do not want.” Additionally, “battering can also include the use of physical and sexual violence, threats and intimidation, emotional abuse and economic deprivation.” (The
National Domestic Violence Hotline). To take the definition of domestic violence a step further, we must discuss what it means to be domestic. Violence was defined earlier, but domestic plays a crucial part in distinguishing these actions from typical violence. What categorizes domestic violence as domestic violence, is where it occurs. As mentioned by Margi Laird McCue, domestic violence is what it is because it takes place in the homes of the victims, and the oppressor, or batterer. Domestic violence occurs in households around the world, amongst fathers, mothers, children, and pets. It does not discriminate against male or female, or through age. Domestic violence is a prevalent problem because it takes place in the home, consequently making it difficult for authorities to discover and take control over. Now, because domestic violence occurs within the household, many may infer that it is merely a family problem, and not to the extent of being a social problem. However, that is a great misconception. A family problem differs from a social problem in that it is a problem which is exclusive to the family, specifically and only impacts them as a unit. Although domestic violence does impact units of families, each scenario and extent differing, it is also a prevalent problem plaguing American society. Therefore, making it a social problem. Additionally, domestic violence is considered a social problem not only because it effects countless families, but because of how it affects these families. The actions of domestic violence are becoming so frequent in today’s society that expectations of individuals are declining, in regards to morality, and as a result the extent of punishments is as well. Sociologically, domestic violence used to be viewed as a rarity in society, and once identified, stunned everyone. Presently, it seems as if our immunity to domestic violence is simultaneously increasing with its frequency. This can be exemplified through the media’s portrayal of domestic violence. Recently, the famous singer and actress Rhianna was all over the media, for reasons other than her career. Her boyfriend Chris Brown,
who is a famous rapper and R and B singer, was charged for allegedly beating and battering her. According to the article *Chris Brown and Rhianna: A Fairy-Tale Romance Gone Awry* by Anne Marie Cruz, this was the prime example of domestic violence. Rhianna, was physically assaulted by Chris Brown, as well as emotionally abused and threatened. Since these were private occurrences, and occurred domestically within their relationship, this was considered domestic violence. This example is valuable because it demonstrates the social problem domestic violence is. After Rhianna’s case with domestic violence became public, the media realized what a significant issue domestic violence truly is. Additional research regarding the subject took place, and more resources became available to the public. For instance, numerous campaigns against domestic violence became more public, resources informing the public about what domestic violence is, and where they can go for help became more available, and awareness about the subject tremendously increased. This shows that with the involvement of the media, and the alarming statistics about domestic violence, it is not just a family problem. Domestic violence is by far a social problem, for it affects a great deal of individuals in today’s society, as well as consumes a large portion of the media’s attention in efforts to promote awareness of the topic, and discover as many solutions as possible to appease the ever so rapidly increasing statistics.

Specially, in the United States, domestic violence is such a significant issue. Approximately 1.3 million women and 835,000 men are physically assaulted by an intimate partner annually in the United States. (American Bar Association). This number is tremendous because it only includes assault. Domestic violence as defined in the previously mentioned paragraph also includes threats, mental and emotional abuse, battering and even death at the extremely rough end of the spectrum. Some additional alarming statistics are as follows. In 2000, 1,247 women and 440 men were killed by an intimate partner. In recent years, an intimate
partner killed approximately thirty three of female murder victims and four percent of male murder victims. (American Bar Association). This statistic is significant because it correlates to the previous in that it shows how far domestic violence can go, and how detrimental the outcomes can be. Upon calculation amongst the aforementioned statistics, approximately ten percent of domestic violence cases in women result in death. This is extremely alarming because this is a preventable cause. Sociologically, an interesting correlation with domestic violence statistics is when firearms are brought into the picture. Currently, in the United States, laws regarding use and possession of firearms vary. However, when introduced into domestic violence cases, the statistics become even more frightening. Also, as collected by the American Bar Association, “access to firearms yields a more than five-fold increase in risk of intimate partner homicide when considering other factors of abuse, according to a recent study, suggesting that abusers who possess guns tend to inflict the most severe abuse on their partners. Of females killed with a firearm, almost two-thirds were killed by their intimate partners. The number of females shot and killed by their husband or intimate partner was more than three times higher than the total number murdered by male strangers using all weapons combined in single victim/single offender incidents in 2002.” These statistics are important because they show how with firearms present, the number of deaths in domestic violence cases increases. As a result, this introduces to American society and government, further contemplations of any alternations needed in regards to laws about firearms. Upon consideration of these statistics, and changes from the American government in efforts of prevention of further increase in domestic violence statistics, this exemplifies how sociologically domestic violence is both a very large issue, as well as a social problem.
Although this was previously mentioned, and inferred through preceding paragraphs, domestic violence plays a huge impact on US society. The statistics in the paragraph above exemplify this, as well as the reasons for domestic violence serving as a social problem. However, aside from these reasons, domestic violence impacts US society by sociologically introducing new mores and folkways into society. This subject makes Americans realize the flaws and problems in society, and determine what we can hold ourselves accountable for, what we can do to change, and analyze specifically what the causes and problems are, and what we can do to solve them. Problems always mandate solutions, and thus domestic violence allows Americans to realize what they are doing incorrectly, throughout all ends of the spectrum and find solutions to better the problem, and society at large. On the contrary, apathy can emerge through efforts being ineffective. Typically, when presented with failure, i.e. laws and outreach to end domestic violence becoming present, and cases of domestic violence increasing, hope to continue developing strategy to make things better declines significantly. It seems as if unless someone gets seriously hurt, such as the Rhianna and Chris Brown case, domestic violence and its consequences takes a back seat on American society. Although this is unintentional, it does say something about mores and folkways. Do we find something acceptable if it is not directly affecting us personally? How are we able to relate to our fellow citizens to make efforts to solve a social problem which is significantly affecting our country? Upon answering these questions, we will realize the true impact domestic violence has both on US society, and ourselves personally.

Now that we have a clear understanding of what domestic violence can be defined as, the realization that it is not merely a family problem, but a social problem as well, and are aware of the extent of domestic violence in the United States and its consequent impact on US Society, we
can analyze domestic violence further. This portion of the essay will analyze what an individual sees and hears about domestic violence in the film, *Defending Our Lives*, from the viewpoint of the sociological theory, the symbolic interactionism theory. In order to analyze the film with this theory, we must first define and understand it. The sociological theory of symbolic interactionism aims to analyze society on a large scale through analyzing in on smaller levels first. This theory aims to understand individuals and society through intricate observation, with great attention to detail and consequently how a person’s appearance, gestures, body language and thus interaction in a group says something about the person, but more importantly society at large. In regards to the film, *Defending Our Lives*, the symbolic interactionism theory is very prevalent. First, a quick synopsis of the film would aide tremendously in making the situation and plot clear to the reader. *Defending Our Lives* is a nonfiction documentary which examines the cases of four abused women who were the victims of domestic violence. Each of them has their own scenario and story which ultimately leads them to defend their own lives, and stand up to their oppressor/abuser with the help of external resources, such as the legal system. This film examines and analyzes the causes of domestic violence, its effects and overall sociological influence in society through each of these women’s stories. Now, in regards to this film’s correlation to the symbolic interactionism theory, there are many examples which support this argument. For instance, in the film, minor observations help the audience examine the trends on domestic violence at large. An example would be the women’s appearance. Each of the women was different in appearance; they varied in size, hair color, eye color, height, bone structure, etc. This is a crucial observation because it shows that domestic violence does not discriminate. As a result, this implies that domestic violence rather can root from internal conflict from the abuser/oppressor. This also says that sociologically, it doesn’t matter what one looks like, if they are in the right place or
situation at the right time, then unfortunate scenarios of domestic violence are inevitable.

Another micro scale observation was socioeconomic status. Each of the four women’s socioeconomic statuses in the film varied, from very poor financially, to middle class, to very well off financially. This is representative in that domestic violence is not an issue of economic or social class. Rather, it is an issue of internal conflict within the abuser/oppressor.

Additionally, it shows that a common misconception within society, that domestic violence only occurs in very poor, distasteful families is false. Instead, it has the potential to, and does occur throughout all levels of economic status in society. Also, this film demonstrates how domestic violence is not a race or ethnicity issue. In the film, each of the women were of different origins, ethnicities, races and from different locations within the country. Yet, each of them was abused, without any difference in treatment from their abuser/oppressor, and ended with a negative outcome, feeling upset, confused, distraught and hurt. All of these micro scale details are useful for that they demonstrate that domestic violence on the macro scale, and sociologically at large, is a nondiscriminatory action which can not be blamed on the abused victim. The abused victim was merely at the right place at the right time, with the wrong person. The abuser or oppressor instead possessed the wrong feelings and had uncontrollable problems or emotions at a time where he or she was out of control, to cope with them in a suitable, beneficial to one self manner that would have maintained a healthy relationship with their partner, and caused them self to remain a normal, healthy human being. Aside from these women being abused in the film, it also describes how each of them overcame their struggles of domestic violence through defending their own lives through various methods. Amongst each of the four victims, all of them came out of their domestic violence case alive, which was a major accomplishment considering the extent of all of their cases. A common theme in each of their scenarios is the fact
that there was a tell tale sign that their relationship was unbearably safe at the time. After that realization became present, each dealt with it in a different way which correlated to their personality, situation of course, and resources available. This correlates to the symbolic interactionism theory because it shows that although the extent of domestic violence varied among each of the four individuals, they all had a point where they realized that this was unacceptable and if they did not do something about it in the near future, they would be killed, or even worse their loved ones would be. Sociologically this implies the pattern that can be derived from the aforementioned commonality; once the domestic violence victim realizes their abuser or oppressor has the potential and intention to kill them or their loved one, they will make the effort to defend their own life, and consequently find a way to leave the destructive relationship and cycle of domestic violence. Also, in regards to the cycle, this film puts forth through each of these individuals situations, the domestic violence cycle, which through all the differences present, occurs in each of their lives. According to Turning Point Services, the domestic violence cycle contains the following stages. The first stage is the tension building stage, where the victim is at a normal state, completing their normal activities and duties in their life. Meanwhile, the abuser or oppressor is having their own internal conflicts, which are consequently building up significant tension internally. However, during this stage of the cycle, the abuser does not harm the victim, rather he or she just begins to show signs that they are ready to begin the next stage of the cycle. After the tension building stage, the tension escalates into the violent episode. The title of this stage makes the occurrences within it self explanatory, however to clarify any misconceptions, during this stage the abuser or oppressor has all of his or her tensions escalate to their greatest potential, and ultimately, the battering takes place. This stage is the most violent of the three in the cycle, because the largest amount of physical harm occurs during this time. When
applicable, death occurs during this part of the cycle. When this stage of the cycle is finished, the absence of battering or honeymoon stage occurs. During this stage, one of two things can occur. The batterer can have the potential to disregard the previous stage of the cycle, the violent episode, completely. In this scenario, the batterer will act oblivious to the violent episode and feelings of guilt will arise, thus leading to the tension building stage once again. On the contrary, this stage of the cycle is also often referred to as the honeymoon stage, in that the batterer realizes what happened. As a result, he or she is very apologetic to the person they abused, and often apologizes extensively, making promises that this will never happen again, and that they love them. This stage often involves a great deal of pleading for the partner or victim not to leave the abuser. In most scenarios, the abusers begging works, and the cycle begins once again.

Through explanation of this cycle, one is able to understand how domestic violence, especially in the film *Defending Our Lives*, is a prime example of the symbolic interactionism theory. Although each of the four victims is different individually and in their case of domestic violence, the cycle is what keeps each of their cases of domestic violence going. Also, as the cycle prolongs, the severity of the domestic violence increases, and unfortunately there are only two endings for the cycle. The first, is the victim realizing their endangerment, and finding a way to leave the batterer. The second, and most detrimental, is death.

The final portion of this essay will discuss what exactly the battered wife syndrome is, and how the courts have generally viewed it. This section of the essay is very sociologically relevant in that it will show how society is identifying the problem, the battered wife syndrome, and consequently how its effect on society is allowing the American government, and society at large to analyze the problem and consequently make amends and efforts to change it and find a
solution, therefore showing the sociological progress of society by finding and constructing a solution for a both social and family problem.

Once again, in order to analyze the concept of battered wife syndrome, we must first define it. The battered wife syndrome can most concisely be defined as “a pattern of signs and symptoms, such as fear and a perceived inability to escape, appearing in women who are physically and mentally abused over an extended period by a husband or other dominant individual.” (Medical Dictionary) At large, this refers to women in a marriage or a relationship who are taking part in the previously mentioned cycle of domestic violence, as victims, and who are unaware of being victims of abuse, and thus unable to escape it. Since the battered wife syndrome is often unidentified within the victim it prolongs, and often does not end until either the woman is battered or beaten to death, or an external source is able to identify it and enforces divorce or another type of disengagement of the abuser and the victim. Another misconception often associated with battered wife’s syndrome is that it is solely the man having internal tensions which consequently lead him to abusing the victim. In Gretchen Arnold’s article, *A Battered Women’s Movement Perspective of Coercive Control*, a very just explanation of an additional concept is explained. That is, “Domestic Violence is better conceptualized as men's attempts to destroy women's autonomy and reinstate patriarchy in intimate relationships.” (Arnold). This article was additionally informative in that it brought forth an innovative perspective on my research regarding how the courts generally view battered wife syndrome. Arnold’s perspective discusses how in order to first provide battered and all women in general freedom from coercive control, the courts and American society must first acknowledge women’s freedom in both the public and private lives. After that is accomplished, the courts must look to see what other efforts can be introduced to end the struggles millions of Americans
face with domestic violence and consequently aim to end the battered wife syndrome. Although this article discussed some innovative perspectives regarding the subject matter, it was very biased in that it came from a feminist perspective. However, it is always useful to analyze from each side of the spectrum.

A major law, universal in most courts regarding Battered Woman Syndrome is the Battered Woman Defense. This originated due to the fact that many abused victims, primarily women, have been abused so severely that they have no other just forms of defense against their abusers. However, contrary to any misconceptions, this defense is not a law, it is merely an understanding by the courts that battered women in just scenarios have this to defend themselves. Additionally, this defense does not constitute killing or murder, although this is yet another common misconception. Rather, the battered woman defense does constitute the following defenses, self-defense to prevent the abuser from physically harming the victim to the point of death, or any unjust level, therefore to end the physical abuse. Also, provocation, insanity and diminished responsibility. Basically, this defense says that the number of women suffering from battered women’s syndrome is tremendously increasing universally, and as a result, women must have available several defenses to protect themselves until the point where they are ready and in realization that they can take this matter to court for further legal action.

Once a women suffering from battered women’s syndrome realizes her predicament, and its severity, she often times seeks the help of external forces to solve her problem and end the relationship or marriage. Typically, courts encourage help of the police to press charges, however in cases of marriage, a divorce is mandated. In such scenarios, the battered women syndrome victim seeks the legal help of a divorce or criminal attorney who will aide in the divorce trial, as well as explaining to the court the specifications of the victims scenario, so based
on those specifications, i.e. rape, murder, etc., criminal charges can be assessed. This procedure is taken because presently, it is difficult to assess such actions and cases on the basis of being a victim of abuse alone, since the extent varies so significantly. Also, the laws currently in place do not specifically identify cases of battered wife syndrome, since that is technically defined as a medical condition, due to its physical and psychological attributes. Thus, there are no specific laws that provide legal consequences to abusers who cause battered wife syndrome.

Overall, domestic violence is a detrimental occurrence in society that is constantly increasing. As discussed in this essay, domestic violence is a social problem, that affects millions of Americans in society, as well as countless other individuals throughout the world, although it does also classify as a family problem because it does occur in individual family units as well. Based on the statistics I’ve put forth, and the countless others presented by the media, and other external sources, the fact that domestic violence is a significant problem in the United States is obvious, and the impact this has is not helping the advancement of American society at all. The film *Defending Our Lives* also allowed the correlation between domestic violence and the symbolic interactionism theory to become present, showing that domestic violence does not discriminate amongst appearance, gender, socioeconomic status, or any other factors. It affects millions of Americans regardless of these micro scale factors; domestic violence is a macro scale problem. Finally, domestic violence is so detrimental that it can ultimately lead to the battered wife syndrome which only intensifies the complications of domestic violence. Unfortunately, this is a medical condition, so this makes it difficult for the courts to take legal action against abusers without justification from legal professionals such as criminal or divorce attorneys. At large, domestic violence has many sociological impacts on society, and until the intensity of the problem is identified, a solution cannot arise.
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