Introduction

The war on women’s bodies continues unabated across the globe. Following the declaration of violence as a serious and fast-growing public health problem worldwide at the 1996 World Health Assembly, the first World Report on Violence and Health was published in 2002. The report provided descriptions of the breadth, typology, the impact and key risk factors for violence as well as key interventionist strategies and recommendations for action (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). Within the well-established base of psychological literature on domestic violence and abuse, the ecological framework often employed in mainstream community psychological research has been central to the mapping of global violence and addressing its causes and consequences. Emerging within the first wave of violence research (Bowman et al., 2015), the shift towards an epidemiological, public health and ecological approach has been propelled by global public health imperatives and has largely taken an interventionist stance.

Psychological researchers across the global South and North committed to the ecological framework have taken to conceptualising domestic violence, and more broadly, violence against women as “a complex outcome of intersecting risk factors across the human lifespan and within the different tiers of the ecological systems that shape it” (Bowman et al., 2015, p. 243). Framed through a perspective of ‘risk’, this body of work foregrounds the ecological model to understand the multifaceted aspects of violence and to identify who is most at risk of perpetrating violence and who is most at risk of becoming victims, varying across different populations and contexts (Heise, 1998). Although acknowledging the importance of this line of enquiry in gaining more holistic insight into the problem of domestic violence, we reiterate our own (Boonzaier, 2018; van Niekerk & Boonzaier, 2019) as well as other scholars’ (Hydén, Gadd, & Wade, 2015) arguments that critically interrogate and problematise this ‘risk’ language, and the implications thereof. More specifically, we argue that much psychological work on domestic violence centres discourses of ‘risk’ that tend to individualise and decontextualise the problem of violence. This kind of ‘risk’ language aligns with neoliberalist ideologies that foreground individual agency, choice and empowerment. However, it fails to acknowledge how social injustices are shaped within complex systems and structures, such as racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and globalisation (Rutherford, 2018). Importantly, these critiques additionally bring into view debates on psychology’s relevance for sufficiently centring social justice issues.
The debate on psychology’s relevance has been a recurring issue, evoked to critically assess the discipline’s complicity in maintaining the status quo, while arguing for the importance of centring a liberatory and social justice agenda. Critiques of psychology include, for example, unequal access to mental health services and policies (Pillay & Freeman, 1996), stigmatising questions and engagements with race (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018), stereotypical engagement with questions of sex, sexuality and gender (Shefer, Boonzaier, & Kiguwa, 2006) as well as the silencing and marginalisation of black women scholars and gender research in mainstream psychological journals (Boonzaier & Shefer, 2006; Kiguwa & Langa, 2011). This latter critique is particularly driven by the peripheral positioning of feminist psychological activism and engagements in mainstream psychological professionalisation. As noted by Kessi and Boonzaier (2018),

despite the advances made in theorising gendered and other forms of subjectivity, a cursory reading of any mainstream psychological journal will evidence the ways in which the discipline of psychology continues to discipline and reproduce essentialising and stigmatising tropes – especially of those who are already marginalised.

(p. 303)

Despite the establishment of alternative forms and practices of psychology – such as critical community psychologies, critical and feminist psychologies for example – that aim to address political agendas with greater social relevance, we illustrate in this chapter how this discourse of (ir)relevance continues to pervade much mainstream psychological research and practice on domestic violence and abuse, illustrating that further labour is necessary.

In this chapter, we focus on the discipline of psychology and the ways in which it has (dis)engaged with questions of violence against women and the attendant challenges and implications, with a particular focus on the ways in which it reproduces individualised discourses that decontextualise the problem of domestic violence. We illustrate how some psychological discourse on domestic violence and abuse may close down possibilities for knowledge production in the service of ending violence against women and non-normative persons, leaving silences and complexities unattended. More specifically, we ask what discourses will lead us closer to equality and a world free of violence, and which ones will take us further away? Some recognition has been given to the role of the discipline and its complicity in the perpetuation of racism and the maintenance of the racialised status quo but little proportional attention has been paid to the ways in which it has advanced heteronormative, essentialist, damaging and stereotypical thinking on gender-entanglements. Through our interrogation of the implications of individualising and pathologising language in psychological discourse and how it shapes power and oppressions experienced by various identities exposed to domestic violence, we adopt an intersectional approach to our analysis of discourses – a concept developed by second-wave black feminists, and explains the complex ways in which social identities related to sexuality, ethnicity, gender, class, race, disability and so forth, intersect and experience oppressions and power based on their positioning within the social strata (Collins, 2010; Crenshaw, 1994). This intersectional analysis is conducted through the interrogation of the following discourses broadly emerging across the psychological literature on domestic violence: risk and representation; trauma and pathologisation; and heteronormativity. Importantly, as decolonial feminist psychologists we engage with these discourses to comment on the possibilities for future research and practice in psychology.
‘Risk’ and representation

This discourse on gendered and racialised ‘risk’ offers a critical reflection on how the ‘other’ is represented in psychological work attempting to explain domestic violence and abuse. Some of the key global themes emerging from psychological scholarship are mapped according to the ecological levels of individual, relationship, community and societal risk factors. These include: poverty; low education; substance abuse; history of aggression and abuse; cultural norms that make violence permissible; and patriarchal practices and belief systems that support men’s domination over women and children, economic and social power imbalances, disease, and death of family members (Babalola, 2014; Berg et al., 2010; Burlaka, Grogan-Kaylor, Savchuk, & Graham-Bermann, 2017; Dahlberg & Krug, 2002; De Puy, Abt, & Romain-Glassey, 2017; Kelmendi & Baumgartner, 2017; Mootz, Stabb, & Mollen, 2017; Ní Raghallaigh, Morton, & Allen, 2017). Within studies that examined associations between pre-determined risk factors and domestic violence, several examined associations between such violence and alcohol use (Berg et al., 2010; Pitpitan et al., 2013), place of residence (urban versus rural; Ayotunde, Akin-toye, & Adefunke, 2014), physical disability (del Río Ferres, Megías, & Expósito, 2013), mental illness (Khalifeh, Oram, Trevillion, Johnson, & Howard, 2015) and partner’s gender role beliefs and levels of general violence (Herrero, Torres, Rodríguez, & Juarros-Basterretxea, 2017) were found. For example, Burlaka and colleagues (2017) looked at the possible associations between domestic violence and family, parent and child characteristics in a group of Ukrainian mothers. They found lower maternal education, unemployment, separate living arrangements and residing in an urban area to be significantly associated with domestic abuse.

In this literature on who is most at risk of experiencing violence, discourses of helplessness are often present and can be described as scripts that position women as inevitable victims of future violence, especially if they had been victimised in the past. Studies of re-victimisation and multiple victimisations abound in the scholarly literature with a history of child abuse or witnessing a mother being abused being described as a risk factor for later revictimisation. The discourse of learning victimisation locates itself in findings that experiences of childhood trauma contribute to women becoming later victims of men’s violence (Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004). While both women and men may have been victims of violence in childhood, women are described as being groomed for further victimisation, while men are groomed for further perpetration of violence. A ten-year longitudinal study found that women with mothers who suffered abuse from their husbands were (1) more likely to experience sexual abuse as a child, (2) more likely to enter abusive relationships as an adult and (3) more likely to have daughters who experienced sexual abuse as a child (McCloskey, 2013). Moreover, childhood sexual abuse among third-generation daughters was related to anxiety around romantic relationships, dating violence and increased sexual risk-taking (McCloskey, 2013). This is important work that at the very least manages to provide evidence of how pervasive and normalised gender-based violence is. However, careful attention must be paid to how this research is framed and where our focus is placed in order to avoid configuring violence as inevitable and positioning women as perpetual victims at risk for men’s violence. If not, we run the risk of further entrenching long-standing narratives about women being to blame for their own victimisation, and absolving men of their culpability, thus setting up a circular, reinforcing loop of inevitable violence that women invite onto themselves.

This ‘risk’ language also feeds into a racialised discourse on domestic violence in the psychological literature. Categories that position ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ along the male/female gender binary also tend to reinforce stigmatising discourses on race. In psychological literature
that interrogates domestic violence in marginalised, ‘vulnerable’ and low-income settings, it is largely the case that the risk profiles generated from this work point primarily to poor, black and marginalised men who are constructed as perpetrators and poor, black and marginalised women who are constructed as ‘victims’. Through recurring themes in psychological literature that highlight high levels of poverty, income inequality and unemployment that oftentimes occur along racialised divisions and are positioned as risk factors for victimisation and perpetration of this violence, it unequivocally labels black and marginalised people and communities as products of and at risk for violence. This pattern is amplified in the context of psychological literature that repetitively seeks out low-income, ‘disadvantaged’ communities to study risky sexual behaviours; substance abuse, including problematic alcohol consumption and HIV risk. This kind of racialised discourse positions black men and women’s very racialised identities as risk factors for violence but also problematically serves to only locate such violence in poor, black and marginalised spaces. This is not to say that gendered and sexual violence does not exist in these contexts, but rather that they are not the only contexts within which such violence occurs. This kind of discourse is not only stigmatising and problematic, but also a form of violence against black people and communities, especially in the context of heteropatriarchal, capitalist systems that keep poor black people subjugated, and that position black men in particular as threatening (see Boonzaier & van Niekerk, 2019).

It is commonly argued, especially amongst scholars located in the global South, that psychology has reinforced a Euro-American approach that centres knowledge production from the North, and colonial ways of representing people and communities (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018). These forms of knowledge depict marginalised peoples in dehumanising and pathologising ways, and reflect problematic ways of working with the ‘other’. Depictions of black and marginalised peoples and communities in the scholarship on violence do not depart significantly from problematic colonial representations.

Research emerging from this ‘risk’ and interventionist approach to domestic violence research has made important strides in providing patterned understandings of violence. However, we argue that the full complexity of this violence cannot be accounted for by a language of risk factors and cause and effect alone. It appears that the hegemonic focus on risk factors has hindered theoretical advancement on how and why violence has become normative and has the inadvertent outcome of making individuals responsible for their exposure to domestic violence. Scholars, such as Bowman and colleagues (2015), have called for more nuanced studies of how forms of violence are enacted to make layers of complexity more evident. They argue that psychology’s incorporation of the public health framework and its predominant use of survey data fails to engage adequately with the tracing of historical patterns, and the links between subjectivities and contexts that provide depth of insight into violent enactments. In foregrounding ‘why’ questions, they envision comprehensive insights into the psychological study of violence, which involve interrogating a range of factors “from the socio-structural to the individual, the immediate and background factors, the subject and the context, the subjective and the objective, and the systemic and symbolic” (Bowman et al., 2015, p. 245). In redirecting the focus of enquiry, a shift in language might also invite us to think differently about this violence. Questions that, for example, centre enquiries into the intergenerational cycling of domestic violence and the manifestations and effects thereof may allow us to centre discourses that position women as always at risk and as inevitable victims, just by virtue of their being positioned as women. In addition it allows for a critical perspective on how black, poor and marginalised communities are represented in the scholarship on violence.

We thus argue for the centring of alternative, resistant forms of psychology that take the “psychology of the oppressed as the starting point” (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018) while centring a
social justice approach. Some of these alternate forms of psychology emerging from postcolonial contexts, include but are not limited to, liberation psychology in Latin America (e.g., Jiménez-Domínguez, 2009; Montero & Sonn, 2009), black consciousness movements in South Africa (Manganyi, 1973), indigenous psychologies from the Australasian region (e.g., Groot, Rua, Masters-Awatere, Dungeon, & Garvey, 2012) or decolonial feminist and postcolonial psychologies (e.g., Kessi & Boonzaier, 2017, 2018). These approaches include reflections on the politics of location and practice in psychology and take questions of racism, sexism, homophobia and oppression seriously. They draw on intersectional approaches to domestic violence enquiries that move beyond a sole focus on gender towards acknowledging how poverty, unemployment, race and class relations, whiteness and cultural tradition shape men’s violence against women (Boonzaier & van Niekerk, 2019; Moolman, 2013; van Niekerk, 2019). This work suggests that an intersectional lens is central to intervening with men who are violent towards intimate partners but who are themselves marginalised at the intersection of their race and class identities and who have “little stake in the patriarchal dividend” (Boonzaier & van Niekerk, 2018, p. 2). Despite the importance of broadening the scope of critical psychological enquiry, these theories and methodologies have not necessarily been centred in mainstream psychological teaching and research in psychology (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018). A further limitation to psychological theorising on domestic violence against women is the perpetuation of individualism and the pathologisation of ‘victims’.

**Discourses of trauma and ‘pathology’**

In the vast body of psychological research on gender-based violence (GBV) – featuring women who have been victimised through sexual and physical assault, domestic and partner violence – a key focus is on the psychosocial and diagnostic outcomes for women victims. Much of this work cultivates discourses around psychopathology, whilst furthermore foregrounding psychological practice that ‘treats’ the trauma of abuse through biomedical models that individualise experiences and recovery from domestic violence. These kinds of circulating discourses, we argue, work to individualise not only the outcomes of such violence, but also the ‘treatment’ thereof.

While many studies consider the broader psychosocial outcomes of being exposed to gender-based violence, others look more specifically at the associations between gender-based violence and the diagnosis of one or more mental disorders. These studies examining specific diagnostic outcomes in women who have experienced domestic violence have found associations with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse (Rees et al., 2011; Schwartz et al., 2014; Vázquez, Torres, & Otero, 2012; Walsh, Hasin, Keyes, & Koenen, 2016). For example, one study looked at the relationship between gender-based violence and diagnosis of a mental disorder in a demographically representative sample of Australian women (Rees et al., 2011). They found that experiences of intimate partner violence, non-partner physical violence, rape and sexual assault and stalking were significantly associated with a range of mental health disorders, as well as overall impaired quality of life. Another examined the association between lifetime experiences of partner and non-partner physical or sexual assault or stalking and personality disorders in a demographically representative sample of women living in the United States (Walsh et al., 2016). They found lifetime experiences of these forms of violence to be associated with greater odds of meeting criteria for a personality disorder. Moreover, they found that women who had experienced multiple instances of such violence were at greater risk for meeting criteria for more than one personality disorder. Similarly, another study found significant associations between experiences of gender-based violence and symptoms of depression as well as current and previous drug use (Schwartz et al., 2014).
These are just a few examples of the kinds of questions that continue to occupy psychologists in the study of gender-based violence more broadly, but also more specifically domestic violence. It is no coincidence that a large body of psychological work on victims of domestic violence has examined the incidence of psychopathology amongst women who have been victimised. To a large degree, psychology has failed to counter individualising discourses in relation to women’s experiences of violence from men (Haaken, 2010). The social and political implications of the diagnostic labelling of abused women has largely been overlooked in this body of work, framing women’s victimisation in individualising and pathologising ways, and paying little attention to the multiplicity of modes of power, inequities and its range of intersections. As expressed by Ussher (2010),

Stripping accounts of women’s misery of any acknowledgement of the historical and political context of women’s lives, whilst paying lip service to sociocultural or psychological influences, thus serves to shore up the very structural factors that lead to distress in the first place, through making gender inequality an invisible issue.

(p. 20)

The discourse of pathology is also apparent in the literature related to psychological intervention for trauma. Biomedical approaches for trauma are commonly referenced within the psychological literature and are used to trace the ways in which emotional memories generate certain biological responses in the brain (Mannell, Ahmad, & Ahmad, 2018). Central to biomedical psychotherapeutic approaches – as well as cognitive behavioural and exposure therapies – are the therapeutic practices of allowing survivors of trauma to tell their stories with the purpose of assessing the reconstructed stories (Hofmann, Asnaani, Vonk, Sawyer, & Fang, 2012). This biomedical approach to psychological intervention for trauma therefore requires that therapy serves to identify the traumatic event, with the aim of retelling the narrative to arrive at a more positive cognition (Mannell et al., 2018). However, some scholars have shown the limitations of the biomedical approach to psychological therapeutic intervention, especially in the case of women experiencing domestic violence in high prevalence and low-income settings. These limitations include the biomedical approach’s (1) capacity to pathologise, (2) limited use and applicability in marginalised settings and (3) potential breaches in ethics (Mannell et al., 2018).

It has been argued that psychoanalytic therapies are challenging to implement as they require specialised resources, many of which are not readily available in marginalised, poor communities (Mannell et al., 2018). Furthermore, the biomedical approach raises important ethical concerns through survivors’ retelling and re-enacting stories of trauma, especially in spaces where domestic violence is ongoing and where there is the very pervasive threat of continuing violence (Mannell et al., 2018). The approach’s construction of trauma as an individualised pathology furthermore obscures larger systems of power, such as heteropatriarchy, that keep gendered inequality and domestic violence in place.

Kessi and Boonzaier (2018) and Segalo (2015) argue that the discipline of psychology although positioned as the appropriate point of enquiry for traumatic histories has done little to attend to questions that centre historically contextualised, gendered, raced and localised understandings of trauma and its responses. Attention to transgenerational trauma in psychological work is central to engaging with the high levels of gendered violence we see persisting across the globe and particularly in global southern contexts with protracted histories of colonialism (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018).
A feminist psychological study with women living in safe houses in Afghanistan called for socially transformative interventions that challenge this discourse of individualised pathology present in biomedical psychological approaches to trauma amongst women survivors (Mannell and colleagues, 2018). The study also incorporated storytelling not only to reduce particular symptoms but as a tool to begin a process of conscientisation, empowerment and advocacy. The authors concluded that for many of the women, the opportunity to share their stories without moral judgement or blame, and in socially supportive environments had a significant impact on their well-being. Additionally, they argued that narrative storytelling incorporates a shift from addressing what are deemed as problematic thoughts in the biomedical approach, towards giving women the opportunity to imagine more positive identities and outcomes for themselves. Storytelling spaces established as part of interventionist practices that address domestic violence against women are growing in utilisation, to advance empowerment and personal expression for women survivors of violence.

Importantly, this focus on ‘whose knowledge matters’ is one that raises critical engagements around ‘expertise’ and how certain forms of ‘knowledge’ are regarded as more valuable than others. We need to keep asking ourselves what constitutes expertise on violence against women in ongoing critical psychological work, as well as who decides this, and with what criteria. Importantly, do these criteria reflect women’s lived experience? To answer these questions and craft new stories about recovery from sexual, physical and verbal assault, we have to listen to the survivors themselves as they are always the first experts. Feminist psychological research is grounded in political commitment to women’s equality and the value of women’s experiential knowledge, and it must be reclaimed and reasserted by us as researchers and practitioners, in research projects, at women’s centres and in the courtroom. When we listen, we hear stories about women who find meaning in collective sharing and support that helps them find their own voice and challenge the stigma and silence that surrounds their experiences of domestic violence and abuse. The next discourse furthers this dialogue around the exclusion and silencing of some ‘voices’ in psychological scholarship.

**Heteronormativity**

The literatures on domestic violence, across disciplines including psychology as well as government, policy, justice and practice-based responses globally have overwhelmingly assumed a heteronormative framework in which women feature as victims and men as perpetrators, and which adheres to heteronormative sexuality and gendered boundaries. Psychology as a discipline has also been argued to maintain and reinforce heteropatriarchal structures whilst experiences that challenge the normative – such as work on gender and sexual diversity – are marginalised and silenced (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018). Mainstream psychological knowledge production has often been framed through the lens of white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, cis-gendered men’s experiences whilst decentring women’s issues (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018).

A recent report (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2018a) and tracking efforts by advocates (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2017, 2018b) illustrate that fatal violence disproportionately affects transgender women of colour in the United States and globally and that intersections of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia conspire to make this group vulnerable to disproportionate barriers in the help-seeking aftermath of a violent incident. However, we need more work in this area to understand the violence and more complete representation of the experiences of transgender survivors of domestic and partner violence.
Along the lines of sexuality, a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s latest *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey* (Black et al., 2011) breaks down its data along the lines of sexual orientation to illustrate that not only heterosexual men and women are involved in situations of domestic violence at high rates. In fact, lesbian-, gay- and bisexual-identifying women, according to this report, experience some of the highest rates of intimate partner violence: “43.8% of self identified lesbians reported to have been physically victimized, stalked, or raped by an intimate partner in their lifetime, compared to 35.0% of heterosexual women, 29.0% of heterosexual men, and 26.0% of gay men” (ibid., p. 66). Cannon and Buttell (2015) remark that “same-sex relationships are rendered deviant and invisible” (p. 69) by the very same “patriarchal system that legitimizes male violence, as a bid for control, against women” (ibid., p. 69).

Limited empirical research is a reason why subsequent policy and intervention proposals may not effectively be accessible to, target or assist (even help-seeking) queer individuals who are either offenders or victims in domestic violence situations. This lack of research sustains the urgent need for psychology as a discipline to establish knowledge on the experiences of such violence amongst queer and trans women, and its implications for service providers and practice.

The language of psychology provides an important resource through which gender-based violence can be framed, by both victims, perpetrators, bystanders and others who encounter violence. Psychological discourse in particular has been extremely influential in shaping representations of victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. We need to be mindful of the ways in which mainstream psychological discourse has produced and reproduced heteronormativity by setting women up as helpless victims and men as inevitable perpetrators – allowing no room for challenging normative, restrictive and binary notions of gender that produce violence in the first place (Shefer, 2016). These limited ways of being and seeing additionally offer little opportunity to understand the complexities around identities as well as the complex ways in which domestic violence and abuse function.

**Implications and conclusions**

This chapter traces dominant psychological discourse on domestic violence and abuse and illustrates some of the challenges, silences and problematics delivered in current critiques of psychological theories and approaches. Although we highlight the importance of various approaches to psychological knowledge production on domestic violence, we also interrogate what it means to develop a ‘relevant’ psychology – one that speaks more holistically to the needs of people located in marginalised historical, social and cultural contexts and that is sensitive to contextual nuances that shape experiences of domestic violence. In contexts where histories of slavery and colonialism have shaped ongoing violations against its inhabitants, various forms of violence – not only interpersonal forms, but also those at the structural level – ought to be viewed as deeply interrelated, rather than distinct from domestic violence (Bowman, Stevens, Eagle, & Matzopoulos, 2014). This involves acknowledging the broader links between poverty, unemployment and domestic violence, and other forms of violence to unsettle discourses that individualise, pathologise and that make some marginalised identities risk factors for their own victimisation and perpetration of violence. As psychological researchers, we need to be critical about how these ‘risk factors’ are associated with violence or we will be in danger of producing simplistic explanations that continue to marginalise those individuals and communities who are already on the margins.
It is also worthwhile for scholars of psychology – in both mainstream and critical camps – to caution against other individualising discourses, such as those related to ‘agency’ and ‘empowerment’. Some have challenged this notion of ‘empowerment’ that involves the assumption that conscientising marginalised communities to consider their circumstances differently may help to mobilise them towards community and social change (Barnes, 2015); while ignoring the larger forces and structures of social injustice – such as capitalism, globalisation, patriarchy – that impede individualised practices of becoming active agents and ‘empowered’ (Barnes, 2018). The traditional notion of ‘agency’ is highly dependent on an individual’s positioning, where those who find themselves in positions of power within the social hierarchy are likely to have more access to choice and autonomy in the context of existing structures that support this (Rutherford, 2018). Understanding the discourse of individualisation in the context of systems of globalisation and capitalism provides more insight into the ways in which marginalised people – especially those located in global southern contexts – and their experiences cannot be packaged in individualising, decontextualising ways, and especially through approaches to psychological intervention tailored for those in the global North and imposed on those in global southern contexts.

In conclusion, we need to ask ourselves: what is the purpose of this work? What are the new and alternative stories that we want to see? We must produce counter-stories that resist, disrupt and challenge our current ways of making sense of domestic violence against women if we are to ever tackle the ways in which it continues to persist. It is important that psychologists think through their research practices and what this means for the process of knowledge production as well as the ethics and politics thereof. We need to think about what kinds of psychological research can be useful in centring a social justice agenda (Barnes, 2018) that advances equity and non-violence. It is important that as psychologists we ensure that dialogue around power and critical reflexivity and positionality surfaces in our research on domestic violence to better reflect on how people and communities are represented (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018). We need more imaginative and relevant psychological research on gendered and sexual violence. There is an urgent need for this work to be undertaken in earnest.

**Critical findings**

- Within the well-established database of psychological literature on domestic violence and abuse, the ecological framework often employed in mainstream community psychological research has been central to the ‘mapping’ of global violence and addressing its causes and consequences.
- Much psychological work on domestic violence centres discourses of ‘risk’ that tend to individualise and decontextualise the problem of violence. The hegemonic focus on risk factors has hindered theoretical advancement on how and why violence has become normative, and has the inadvertent outcome of leaving individuals responsible for their own exposure to domestic violence.
- Racialised ‘risk’ discourse positions black men and women’s very racialised identities as risk factors for violence but also problematically serves to only locate violence in poor, black and marginalised spaces.
- Women’s victimisation and trauma has largely been framed in individualising and pathologising ways, paying little attention to the multiplicity of modes of power, inequities and its range of intersections.
• The literatures on domestic violence, across disciplines including psychology as well as government, policy, justice and practice-based responses globally have assumed a heteronormative framework in which women feature as victims and men as perpetrators, and which adheres to sexuality and gender boundaries.

Implications for policy, practice and research

• Ensure that dialogue around power, critical reflexivity and positionality surfaces in psychological research on domestic violence to better reflect on how people and communities are represented.

• Centre alternative, resistance forms of psychology that take the “psychology of the oppressed as the starting point” (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018) while centring a social justice approach.

• Incorporate methodologies that are likely to be instrumental in impacting social justice. For example, intersectional approaches to the study of domestic violence that move beyond a sole focus on gender towards acknowledging how poverty, unemployment, race and class relations, whiteness and cultural tradition shape men’s violence against women are critical.

• We need to regard survivors themselves as the first experts. Feminist psychological research is grounded in political commitment to women’s equality and the value of women’s experiential knowledge, and it must be reclaimed and reasserted by us as researchers and practitioners, in research projects, at women’s centres and in the courtroom.

• Psychologists ought to ensure that dialogue around power and critical reflexivity and positionality surfaces in our research on domestic violence to better reflect on how people and communities are represented.

• We need more imaginative and relevant psychological work on domestic, gendered and sexual violence.

Note

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