

BRIEF REPORT

Understanding Domestic Violence Against Women: Using Evolutionary Psychology to Extend the Feminist Functional Analysis

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Evolutionary psychologists such as Wilson and Daly (1993b) hypothesize that one goal of male-perpetrated domestic violence is control over female sexuality, including the deterrence of infidelity. According to this hypothesis, domestic violence varies with women's reproductive value or expected future reproduction, declining steeply as women age. We tested this hypothesis with a sample of 3,969 cases of male-perpetrated partner-abuse reported to a single police precinct in a large urban area over a 14-year period. Results show that (a) rates of domestic violence decrease as women age, (b) younger men are at greatest risk for perpetrating domestic violence, (c) younger, reproductive age women incur nearly 10 times the risk of domestic violence as do older, post-reproductive age women, and (d) the greater risk of domestic violence incurred by reproductive age women is not attributable solely to mateship to younger, more violent men. Discussion addresses theoretical implications of these findings and suggests a refinement of the feminist hypothesis of domestic violence against women.

Keywords: domestic violence; intimate partner violence; abuse

Domestic violence affects many people in North America. Each year, women in the United States report to law enforcement about 572,000 violent attacks by spouses, ex-spouses, boyfriends, and ex-boyfriends, with young women who are divorced or separated incurring the greatest risk of assault (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994; Rennison & Welchans, 2000; Wilson & Daly, 1993a, 1993b; Wilson, Daly, & Wright, 1993). Rates of domestic violence victimization range from 13.9% (Kennedy, Forde, Smith, & Dutton, 1991) to 16% (Williams & Hawkins, 1989) annually in the United States. Within a lifetime, 30% percent of women in the United States (Williams & Hawkins, 1989) and 27% of women in Canada (Randall & Haskell, 1995) are battered by a partner or ex-partner.

The substantial impact of domestic violence results not just from the large number of women who are victimized, but also from the associated personal and social costs. One fifth of the women reporting domestic violence have been attacked repeatedly in the previous six months (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994). One in two victimized women receive physical injuries, with 40% of victimized women seeking medical treatment for their injuries (Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Although most domestic violence involves nonfatal injuries, domestic violence is a key precursor of many homicides. During 1999, for example, 48% of all homicides (partner and non-partner) in Maine were preceded by domestic violence (Maine Department of Public Safety, 2000).

Given the number of women victimized by intimates and the seriousness of the sequelae, understanding the etiology and occurrence of male-perpetrated intimate-partner violence is a crucial first step toward successful intervention and eventual reduction of violence against women. Over the past 30 years, at least four theoretical approaches have generated hypotheses about the occurrence of male-perpetrated domestic violence. Psychoanalytic theorists propose deficits in the ego structure of the violent man, which cause him to lose control of anger that is unconsciously linked to a conflictual relationship with his maternal figures (see, e.g., Adams, 1990). Many family systems theorists also argue that a man's loss of control over angry feelings is the cause of domestic violence (see, e.g., Geller, 1992). A third explanation of domestic violence proposes that dysfunctional interactional patterns between partners and maladaptive cognitive processes in the individuals result in escalating conflict and eventual violence (Deschner, McNeil, & Moore, 1986; Neidig & Freidman, 1984).

These first three theoretical approaches to domestic violence view the violence as caused by specific deficits: Deficits in ego skills or coping mechanisms; deficits in anger control; and deficits in communication and cognitive skills. In contrast, a fourth hypothesis, derived from feminist theory, states that the violence inflicted on the victim is not a byproduct of underlying deficits, but instead is inflicted strategically and intentionally. Feminist theorists argue that domestic violence is used by men to exert power and control over their female partners (Adams, 1988, 1990; Walker, 1979, 1994).

In recent years, some evolutionary psychologists have suggested a refinement of the feminist analysis of domestic violence. In agreement with certain aspects of feminist analyses, evolutionary psychologists argue that domestic violence is about controlling women, but that it is specifically about controlling women's sexuality (see, e.g., Buss & Malamuth, 1996; Daly & Wilson, 1988). Because ovulation in women is concealed and fertilization occurs internally, men have recurrently faced the adaptive problem of uncertainty of paternity in offspring. Men who failed to solve this problem risked investing resources in children to whom they were genetically unrelated. In addition, cuckolded men incur opportunity costs by forgoing other mating opportunities, and the reputational damage a man incurs by being cuckolded can jeopardize his future mating opportunities (for reviews of the relevant theoretical and empirical literatures, see Buss, 2000, and Daly & Wilson, 1988).

According to one evolutionary psychological perspective, a "solution" to male paternity uncertainty is an evolved male psychology that motivates feelings of proprietary jealousy (Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Wilson & Daly, 1992). These feelings motivate men to guard their mates to prevent them from having sex with other men or to prevent them from leaving the relationship. Such sexual proprietariness is found worldwide (Buss, 1996; Daly et al., 1982). In men, it is responsive to threats (real or imagined) of sexual infidelity or defection by a mate (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Daly & Wilson, 1993; Shackelford, Buss, & Peters, 2000). In one study of married couples (Buss

& Shackelford, 1997), for example, men who anticipated partner infidelity in the future engaged in greater concealment of their partners, exacted greater punishment for a known, suspected, or threatened infidelity, and derogated rivals more than men who did not anticipate future infidelities.

Male sexual proprietariness motivates a range of abusive behaviors (Daly et al., 1982; Malamuth, 1996) that are commonly labeled domestic violence and that serve to circumvent women's choices, especially choices regarding sexual behavior (Buss, 1996; Geary, Rumsey, Bow-Thomas, & Hoard 1995; Smuts, 1996). Although one evolutionary psychological perspective on domestic violence focuses on the use of violence to deter infidelity or relationship break-up, evolutionary perspectives also recognize that many contextual factors contribute to the likelihood that men will perpetrate violence against an intimate partner. These factors include lack of protection of the woman by her relatives (Figueredo & McClosky, 1993; Smuts, 1996), economic resources (Figueredo & McClosky, 1993), social tolerance of domestic violence behavior and, for the abusive man, childhood socialization, neurobiological predisposition, and loss of control of angry feelings (Wilson & Daly, 1993b).

Wilson and Daly (1993b; see also Wilson, Daly, & Scheib, 1997) propose that, en route to inflicting violence on an intimate partner, men solve information-processing problems that generate risk assessments of a partner's sexual infidelity or desertion. This information processing includes assessments of the presence of potential rival males, the social costs of inflicting violence, and the woman's reproductive value or expected future reproduction (Trivers, 1972). Because reproductive value peaks for women soon after puberty and then declines with a woman's age, Wilson and Daly (1993b) hypothesize that attempts to control her reproductive choices through violence will follow a similar trajectory. Specifically, Wilson and Daly (1993b) hypothesize that younger women, with higher reproductive value, are at greater risk of domestic violence than are older women, with lower reproductive value.

Support for Wilson and Daly's (1993b) hypothesis comes from several sources, including their 1988 study in which they found that the risk of uxoricide or wife killing—which they argue is an extreme form of domestic violence—is highest for younger wives in North America (Daly & Wilson, 1988; see also Mercy & Saltzman (1989) for similar findings for United States national homicide data). The United States National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) for 1987-1998 revealed that young women had the highest rates of violent victimization by an intimate male partner (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994; Rennison & Welchans, 2000). Similar findings were reported for a Canadian sample by Wilson, Johnson, and Daly (1995). Buss and Shackelford (1997) found that men married to younger women engaged in more forms of mate guarding, including violence, than did men married to older women.

Failure to comply with a male partner's demands for a sexually exclusive relationship can be costly for the woman (Smuts, 1996) and can lead to escalation of the seriousness or frequency of "autonomy limiting techniques" (Wilson et al., 1995). These techniques are directly linked to the use of violence, according to Wilson and colleagues (1995), who found that the number and degree of men's controlling behaviors were positively correlated with the seriousness of the violence they inflicted on their female partners. That sexual jealousy is a key factor in domestic violence is supported by numerous studies which show that the majority of domestic violence femicides are precipitated by a man's suspicion of his partner's infidelity or her intention to end the relationship (Wilson & Daly, 1992; see Buss, 2000, for a review of the literature).

An alternative explanation for the steady decrease in violence against women as they age is that young women tend to be mated to young men and young men are the most violent age-sex subset of the population. Men aged 16 to 24 years, for example, commit the majority of violent acts, including homicide (Wilson & Daly, 1985). The decrease in violence toward women as women age therefore may be attributable to the aging of men and not attributable to the aging of women. Wilson and colleagues (1995) show that uxoricides per million wives per annum decrease slightly with husband's age, but begin decreasing about 10 years earlier than do uxoricides as a function of wife's age. If the decrease in domestic violence were solely a function of men's decreasing use of violence, that decrease should occur when women are in their late 20s and early 30s, not late 30s and early 40s. Shackelford, Buss, and Peters (2000) found that young women are at greatest risk for uxoricide when they are married to men aged 45 to 54 years. In both of these studies, the "young male syndrome" hypothesis was not supported.

We conducted a new test of Wilson and Daly's (1993b) hypothesis that the risk of domestic violence varies with the woman's reproductive value. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that domestic violence rates will decrease with the increasing age of the woman. We further hypothesized that this risk distribution is not solely attributable to the age of the male perpetrator. To test these hypotheses, we secured data for 3,969 cases of male-perpetrated partner-abuse reported to a single police precinct in a large urban area over a 14-year period.

METHODS

New York City police officers are required to complete an incident report form for each reported case of lethal and non-lethal domestic disturbance. These reports, which track emergency ("911") telephone calls from alleged victims, family members, neighbors, and witnesses, contain some information about the victim and perpetrator. Included in the data are the nature of the relationship (for example, intimate relationship, strangers) and the ages of the victim and the offender. Reports concerning intimate partner violence are furnished to the Domestic Violence Prevention Project (DVPP) of Safe Horizon, a non-profit social service agency serving crime victims. In the data set provided by Safe Horizon, lethal and non-lethal reports were not differentiated.

From 1986 to 1999, DVPP received 5,298 domestic violence reports from the 103rd police precinct in Queens, New York. For the current study, we excluded 908 cases because of missing data for the age or sex of the victim or perpetrator. In addition, we excluded 421 cases in which the male was the alleged victim or the female was the alleged perpetrator. The remaining 3,969 cases involve one female victim and one male perpetrator who were (a) married or cohabiting (marital status was not differentiated in the dataset), or who have a child in common and are (b) both 16 years of age or older. Domestic violence rates were calculated according to relevant population estimates for married and cohabiting individuals provided by the United States Census for the population served by the 103rd precinct (available from the second author upon request).

RESULTS

The average age of victims was 32.7 years ($SD = 9.3$), ranging from 16 to 82 years. The average age of perpetrators was 35.1 years ($SD = 9.6$), ranging from 17 to 78 years. Table 1 shows the per annum number of domestic violence disputes, relevant population estimates,

TABLE 1. Domestic Disputes Per Annum, Population Estimates for Married and Cohabiting Persons, and Corresponding Domestic Dispute Rates as a Function of Age and Sex

| Age | Women | | | Men | | |
|-------|-----------------------------|---------------------|--|-----------------------------|---------------------|--|
| | Domestic Disputes per Annum | Population Estimate | Domestic Disputes per 1000 Women per Annum | Domestic Disputes per Annum | Population Estimate | Domestic Disputes per 1000 Women per Annum |
| 15-24 | 58.8 | 1,358 | 43.3 | 34.9 | 770 | 45.3 |
| 25-34 | 131.7 | 5,958 | 22.1 | 127.9 | 5,018 | 25.5 |
| 35-44 | 81.3 | 6,858 | 11.9 | 97.8 | 5,954 | 16.4 |
| 45-64 | 31.9 | 8,969 | 3.6 | 41.2 | 8,944 | 4.6 |
| 65+ | 1.7 | 2,792 | 0.6 | 3.6 | 3,892 | 0.9 |

Note. Population estimates were secured from the United States Census Bureau. Total number of women and men are not identical because these are estimates, not precise figures. For the same reason, total domestic disputes per annum for women and for men are not identical.

and corresponding domestic dispute rate (number of domestic disputes per 1,000 persons in the relevant population) for each of five age groups, by sex. These age groupings were used because these are the age groupings according to which the census data were provided. Table 1 shows that women aged 15 to 24 years are at greatest risk for domestic violence, a risk that is more than twice as great as the risk for women aged 25 to 34 years. Rates of domestic violence decrease throughout women's reproductive years, to a low of 0.6 domestic disputes per annum per 1,000 women aged 65 or older.

Table 1 also shows that the rate of domestic violence perpetration is highest for men aged 15 to 24 years and declines with men's age. Although younger men are at greatest risk for perpetrating domestic violence, this risk pattern does not unambiguously support the "young male syndrome" hypothesis that younger women are victimized at greater rates because they are in mateships with younger, more violent men. To address this alternative hypothesis for the greater risk of domestic violence for young women, we investigated the effects of partner age differences on domestic violence rates.

Table 2 presents the number of domestic violence disputes per annum for a paired age grouping, population estimates for mated couples in each age grouping (in parentheses), and rates of domestic violence per 1,000 mated couples per age group per annum (in brackets). The data in Table 2 are summarized in Figure 1, which shows domestic disputes per annum per 1,000 couples, as a function of the age difference between the partners. In Figure 1, each increment in age difference is equal to a one-category age difference between partners. Figure 1 shows that the highest rate of victimization is for women mated to men two age categories (about 20 years) younger. The second highest risk of victimization is for women mated to men two age categories older.

Referring back to Table 2, the victimization rate for the youngest women (15-24 years)—women at greatest risk for domestic violence—is highest for women mated to men two age categories older. Thus, although the youngest men are at greatest risk for perpetrating domestic violence, in general, the elevated risk of domestic violence for the youngest women cannot be attributed solely to mateship to younger, more violent men.

TABLE 2. Domestic Disputes Per Annum, Population Estimates^a for Cohabiting and Married Couples, and Corresponding Domestic Dispute Rates^b by Man's Age and Woman's Age

| Woman's Age | Man's Age | | | | |
|-------------|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| | < 25 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-64 | 65+ |
| < 25 | 24.9 (557) [44.7] | 30.6 (657) [46.6] | 2.7 (50) [54.0] | 0.6 (20) [30.0] | N/A |
| 25-34 | 8.9 (126) [70.6] | 80.3 (3,511) [22.9] | 38.4 (1,545) [24.9] | 4.1 (154) [26.6] | 0.1 (8) [12.5] |
| 35-44 | 1.1 (13) [84.6] | 14.5 (477) [30.4] | 48.9 (4,369) [11.2] | 16.5 (1,844) [9.0] | 0.4 (30) [13.3] |
| 45-64 | 0.1 (7) [14.3] | 2.5 (33) [75.8] | 7.5 (472) [15.9] | 19.5 (6,845) [2.9] | 2.2 (1,162) [1.9] |
| 65+ | N/A | 0.1 (5) [20.0] | 0.3 (5) [60.0] | 0.4 (169) [2.4] | 0.9 (3,182) [0.3] |

Note. Population estimates were secured from the United States Census Bureau. Total number of couples is not identical to the total number of women or to the total number of men shown in Table 1, because all figures are estimates, not precise figures. For the same reason, total number of domestic disputes per annum across all couples is not identical to total number of domestic disputes per annum for women or for men shown in Table 1. For cells labeled "N/A," no domestic disputes were reported over the 14-year study period.

^aPopulation estimate is shown in parentheses next to the corresponding domestic dispute figure.

^bDomestic dispute rate is shown in brackets beneath the corresponding population estimate and domestic dispute figures. Domestic dispute rate is calculated as the number of domestic disputes reported per 1000 couples in the relevant population.

As an additional test of the hypothesis that domestic violence is linked to female age and, therefore, reproductive value, we calculated rates of domestic violence for reproductive age women and for postreproductive age women as a function of the age of their partner (younger than 45 years versus 45 years and older). Using 45 years as a crude cut-off for the end of the reproductive period for women, Figure 2 shows that, although men younger than 45 years perpetrate domestic violence at two times the rate of men 45 years and older, reproductive age women were nearly *10 times* more likely to be the targets of domestic assault than were postreproductive age women.

Figure 2 also shows that, although domestic violence rates are roughly equal for men and women younger than 45 years, men 45 years and older are five times more likely than women 45 years and older to be involved in domestic disputes. It therefore appears that men 45 years and over are overrepresented among domestic violence disputes with younger, reproductive age women.

In summary, the results indicate that (a) rates of domestic violence decrease as women age, (b) younger men are at greatest risk for perpetrating domestic violence, (c) younger, reproductive age women incur nearly 10 times the risk of domestic violence as do older, post-reproductive age women, and (d) the greater risk of domestic violence incurred by reproductive age women is not attributable solely to mateship to younger, more violent men.

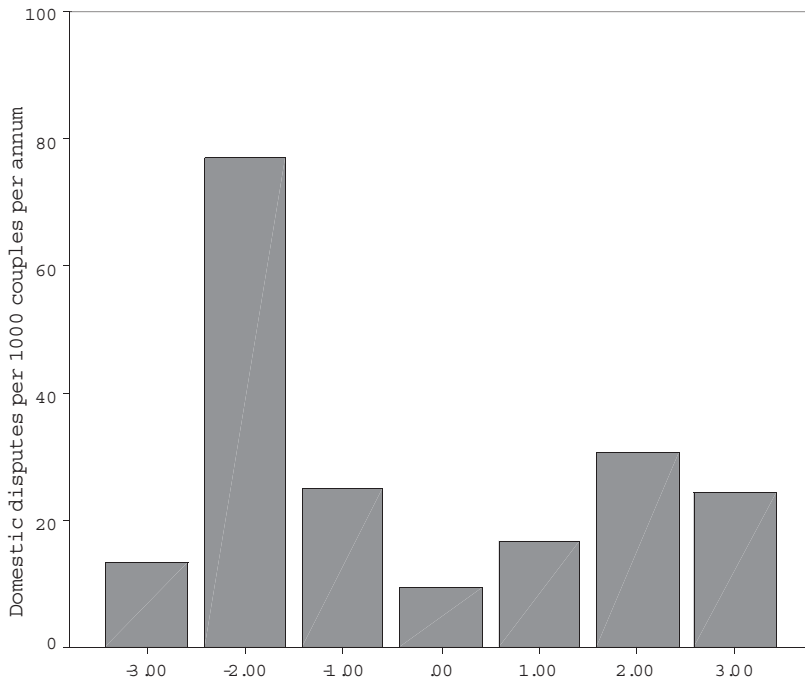


Figure 1. Domestic disputes per 1,000 couples per annum as a function of the age difference between partners, in categories. “1” indicates a one category difference between partners, “2” indicates a two category difference, and so on. Positive values refer to categorical differences in which the woman is older than her partner. “0” refers to cases in which the man and the woman are in the same age category. Categories are as follows, in years: < 25, 25-34, 35-44, 45-64, 65 and older.

DISCUSSION

The present study provides a new test of Wilson and Daly’s (1993b) evolutionary psychological hypothesis that abusive male behavior is an attempt to control female sexual behavior and that rates of domestic violence will therefore decrease with the increasing age and decreasing reproductive value of the woman. This hypothesis is supported in the current research, which indicates that rates of domestic violence decrease substantially as women approach 45 years, an age that corresponds historically with menopause, or zero reproductive value. Reproductive age women are nearly 10 times more likely than postreproductive age women to be the victims of domestic violence. This finding is consistent with data from the National Crime Victimization Survey which found that younger, reproductive age women are seven times more likely to be victims of domestic violence than are older, postreproductive age women (Rennison & Welchans, 2000).

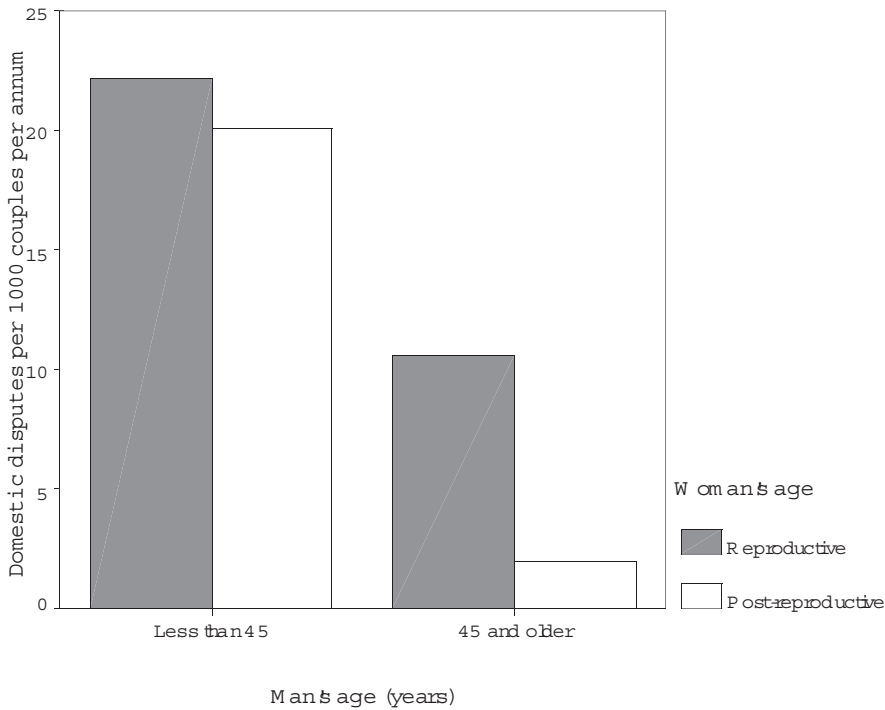


Figure 2. Domestic disputes per 1,000 couples per annum as a function of the man's age and the woman's reproductive status. Reproductive age women are less than 45 years, whereas post-reproductive age women are 45 years and older.

The current study replicates analyses of a national-level Canadian sample in which the youngest women, of highest reproductive value, incurred the greatest risk of domestic assault (Wilson et al., 1995). This high risk of domestic assault for the youngest women in the present study is not due solely to mateship to younger, more violent men. Younger women are at particularly high risk for domestic violence victimization when they are mated to substantially older men. In addition, the current research indicates that, in general, men over age 45 years are not battering same-age partners, but instead are overrepresented as batterers of partners who are younger and of higher reproductive value.

The present findings are consistent with the hypothesis that men use domestic violence to control the sexual behavior of a female partner during her childbearing years. Although there are many factors that men evaluate in their decision to use coercive control, the present study supports the hypothesis that a woman's reproductive value—as indexed by her age—is one of these factors. Further research using more sophisticated methodologies is required to evaluate the relative contributions of factors such as the presence of potential rival mates, the woman's attractiveness, the social costs of using violence, and the woman's reproductive value.

We examined reports to police, not cases in which either probable cause or proof of domestic violence had been established. Domestic violence is an underreported crime (Kennedy, Forde, Smith, & Dutton, 1991; Krishnan, Hilbert, VanLeeuwen, & Kolia, 1997); hence, cases reported to police are a subset of all battering incidents. Further, the present data include reports from just one police precinct. In short, the cases examined for this study may

not be representative of domestic violence in other populations. In addition, several of the computed rates—particularly those according to partner age differences (see Table 2)—are based on small sample sizes and, therefore, are of unknown stability. These rates should be interpreted with special caution. Finally, because marital unions that endure may be less conflictual than those terminated by separation or divorce, the decrease in rates of violence among older couples that we observed may reflect a selection bias in our sample.

A number of studies have found a consistent pattern in which risk of physical assault by a male partner varies with a woman's age and, therefore, her reproductive value. We replicate these results, documenting a striking decrease in rates of domestic violence as women age. Any adequate theory of domestic violence must account for this phenomenon. If the interactional approach is correct, then why do dysfunctional interaction patterns between partners apparently resolve with the woman's increasing age? How can psychoanalytic and family systems theorists explain the evidence that, irrespective of their own age, men can better control their anger when their partner is postreproductive than when she is younger and of reproductive age? And if, as some feminist theorists contend, domestic violence is a reflection of socially acceptable patterns of patriarchal control of women, then why does that control decrease with a woman's age?

The results of this and other studies examining risk patterns for domestic violence suggest that, with slight modification, the feminist hypothesis that domestic violence is a technique that men use to control women fits well with at least one evolutionary psychological perspective on domestic violence. Specifically, the refined feminist hypothesis is that domestic violence represents one technique men use to control a female partner's sexuality. Although that control may extend into every facet of the victim's life, control over her actions, thoughts, and feelings may be used in the service of control over her sexuality.

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