against captured troops was not randomly performed but used definitively to weaken them physically and mentally (Mechanic, 2004). Unlike prisoners, however, people experiencing domestic abuse feel they have somehow provoked it (Heath, 2003).

Various models illustrate how this pattern of behaviour takes place, such as the cycle of violence (Fig 1) and the power and control wheel (National Victim Assistance Academy, 2002). These show that incidents are not random and escalate repetitively as the relationship navigates the cycle (National Victim Assistance Academy, 2002).

Inside both wheels are the behaviours or tactics used to gain and maintain control. The cycle of violence restricts victims to stages through which they will progress, but fails to appreciate that each relationship is different. This, however, is reflected in the power and control wheel, as it allows for fluidity between behaviours and acknowledges that not all must be present. Western culture emphasises individuality and, as such, those who suffer domestic abuse can be blamed when they do not leave (Dunn and Powell-Williams, 2007). The power and control wheel emphasises that victims of abuse are trapped by social and psychological barriers. Dutton and Goodman (2005) highlighted that victims feel powerless to avoid or influence outcomes – this is not a reflection of their own weakness, however, but the interconnected behaviours that subtly build on one another and restrict choices.

**CAUSES OF ABUSE**

Biological and evolutionary perspectives consider males more likely to exhibit violent and aggressive behaviour because they are responding to their natural biological functions (Smith, 2003b). Domestic abuse is then viewed as a pathological phenomenon shown by men with abnormal testosterone levels, a problem they were born with (Smith, 2003b). This explanation fails to account for the other subtle emotional and psychological actions used to control and manipulate (Women’s Aid, 2007).

On the other hand, Perry (2000) argued that men learn early in childhood to become abusive and to accept abuse as normal when they watch aggressive and domineering behaviour in their family. Arguments are a part of relationships; while the use of verbal and psychological abuse to belittle and demean is unacceptable to some, it is part of life for others (Women’s Aid, 2007). In this way, interacting with a partner in a threatening and disrespectful manner is a result of the environment these men have been brought up in and is part of their culture (Perry, 2000).

In a study of male students, White and Smith (2004) found those with a childhood history of observing domestic abuse in their family showed higher rates of abuse towards women in early adulthood, which steadily increased. This is supported by Herrenkhol et al. (2007), who found that men who had witnessed and grown up around domestic abuse had learnt aggression before the age of 15 and were at risk of committing criminally violent acts against women by the age of 21.

Both studies used a longitudinal design, which allowed them to measure how participants’ behaviours changed over time. This design also highlights other variables that are constant throughout and could have an effect on behaviour. While the family setting is important, Herrenkhol et al. (2007) found that poverty and unemployment were also regular variables in abusive participants.

Unfortunately, neither team attempted to explain how their findings could be applied to women who have witnessed abuse in childhood. On the other hand, Herrera and McCloskey (2001) highlighted that only women who have been sexually abused are more likely to commit domestic abuse themselves. This suggests there is an inherent gender difference behind domestic abuse.

**The gender issue**

Gender is seen as an important concept in understanding domestic abuse (Krauss, 2006). While sex is biologically determined, gender is socially constructed through social, behavioural and psychological characteristics that are deemed appropriate for either males or females (Fernandez, 2006). In a patriarchal society, male characteristics are based on being more powerful than females and commanding more resources and respect than them – an image against which men measure themselves (Fernandez, 2006). People who have little power often overuse violence and threats, which would support the notion that men lash out at women they can no longer control or support financially (Jewkes et al., 2002). One suggestion is that lifestyles and relationships are less stable as a result of changing socioeconomic status, which increases confrontation (Lowenstein, 2005).

While it could be argued that men and women from higher socioeconomic groups are less likely to experience domestic abuse, Moe (2007) noted that many residents in a domestic violence shelter were highly educated and had successful careers before being abused. Notably, these were not women trapped by their own ignorance; they described instances in which abuse had prevented them from finding or staying in work and using their wages to establish independence and safety (Moe, 2007).

In summary, a discussion about social stressors does not explain why the intended victims of abuse are predominantly women.

**Feminist theory**

Feminist theorists consider violence to have been legitimised for some time within religion and law (Hanmer, 2003). Domestic abuse is seen as typifying the violent culture of society, and it can be argued that men quickly learn that the powerful structures of religion and law will do little to stop their actions (Sandis, 2006).

A common theme in literature is that abuse is a private matter and should be dealt with in the home (Jones, 2006), which is unsurprising considering the way society has considered women historically (Sandis, 2006). For example, it was not illegal to use violence against one’s wife in the UK until 1891 (Hanmer, 2003). Heath (2003) said the main catalysts for abuse are money, jealousy, housework, friends and children. These suggest that abusive incidents reinforce women’s traditional role in a patriarchal society, implying it is still considered acceptable in modern times to wield power in an abusive manner (Fernandez, 2006).

The media has an enormous influence on culture and it could be argued that it reinforces patriarchal stereotypes. Krauss (2006) found that exposure to media violence positively correlates with rates of adult violence.