Distinguishing Among Types of Domestic Violence*

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Distinguishing Among Types of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is not a unitary phenomenon (Johnson, 2008). There are three major types of intimate partner violence that differ from each other in almost all respects. The main body of this chapter presents the evidence that establishes those differences. I want to begin, however, with a discussion of the gender symmetry debate for two reasons, the first of which is that it was the gender symmetry debate that first led me to consider the possibility that there were different types of intimate partner violence (Johnson, 1993).

Second, and more important, in the U.S. and Canada we are experiencing an anti-feminist backlash from a small but well-organized group that uses the alleged gender symmetry of intimate partner violence as one of the major bases of their attack on the tremendous progress that has been made by the battered women’s movement. Their argument involves (a) denying the role of gender in intimate partner violence, (b) attacking feminist research that shows gender asymmetry, and (c) arguing that programs focused on violence against women are therefore discriminatory. Here are some examples of these arguments in the media and in communications to government agencies: “Men as likely to suffer spousal abuse, Statscan says” (Lawlor, 2002); “Feminist ideologues ignore research that shows domestic violence is just as often started by women as by men” (Young, 2009); finally, a submission to the Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General from The Men’s Project argues that “…the Ontario Government may be in violation of their obligations… [because] the existing network of shelters for victims of family violence exclude[s] men…” (Bennett, 2009). Distinguishing among the major types of intimate partner violence gives the lie to these arguments.
Are Women Really as Violent as Men in Intimate Relationships?

We’ve had over thirty years of research on domestic violence. How could we still be arguing about something as fundamental as who does it—is it primarily men or is it both men and women? The reason we continue to debate the gender symmetry question is that there are legitimate bodies of evidence that seem to support both answers.

*General Survey Research*

Beginning with the 1975 National Family Violence Survey (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980), the first survey research on domestic violence, study after study using general sampling strategies for survey research has found that roughly the same number of men and women have been violent toward their partner in intimate relationships. Table 1 provides a few examples of such research, ranging from that original 1975 survey to a study using 2009 Canadian survey data. Archer’s much-cited meta-analysis concludes that “Women are slightly more likely (d = -.05) than men to use one or more act of physical aggression, and to use such acts more frequently (2000, p. 651).”

*Agency Research*

What is not often noted about Archer’s meta-analysis is that he found a strong interaction of this gender effect with type of sample. Although the general survey samples included in his meta-analysis found men and women to be equally likely to be violent, the few agency samples that he included in his review found men to be the primary perpetrators by far (Archer, 2000, p. 334). Table 2 presents examples of such findings from a variety of studies conducted at different times, in different places, by
different authors, in different agency settings. In each of these examples, and in many others that could be included, agency data indicate that in heterosexual relationships men are the primary perpetrators of intimate partner violence.

_Distinguishing Among Types Explains the Apparent Inconsistency_

Why do we find this dramatic difference between the findings of general survey research and research done in agency settings? Although the difference is often attributed to the almost universal use of the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS) in survey research, an instrument used less often in agency research (DeKeseredy, 2000; Kimmel, 2002), I found the same differences when I compared only agency and survey studies that had all used the CTS (Johnson, 1995). I hypothesized, therefore, that the difference was not about measurement, but about sampling and about the interpersonal dynamics of intimate partner violence. At various times both Straus (1990) and Archer (2000) have noted differences in the findings of survey and agency research, but in both cases they treated the difference as merely a methodological issue. I saw the sampling differences as much more important, requiring a radical revision of our understanding of the nature of intimate partner violence. I hypothesized that there are multiple types of intimate partner violence, and that the sampling effect arises because the two major sampling approaches tap qualitatively different types of intimate partner violence, one gender-symmetric, the other perpetrated primarily by men against women.
Three Major Types of Intimate Partner Violence

In this typology of intimate partner violence the differences among the types are defined not by the nature of violence itself, but by the interpersonal dynamics that produce the violence. Two of the major types are rooted in issues of power and control, the third in the dynamics of conflict management.

*Intimate Terrorism*

In intimate terrorism, the perpetrator uses violence in the service of gaining and holding general control over his or her partner. The control that is the defining feature of intimate terrorism is more than the specific, short-term control that is often the goal of violence in other contexts. The mugger wants to control you only briefly in order to take your valuables and move on, hopefully never to see you again. In contrast, the control sought in intimate terrorism is general and long-term. Although each particular act of intimate violence may have any number of short-term, specific goals, the violence is embedded in a larger pattern of coercive control that permeates the relationship.

Figure 1 is a widely used representation of intimate partner violence deployed in the service of general control. This diagram and the understanding of domestic violence that lies behind it were developed over a period of years from testimony of battered women

**INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

that convinced the staff of the Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project that the most important characteristic of the violence that they encountered was that it was embedded in a general pattern of coercive control (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Such patterns of coercive control cannot, of course, be identified by looking at violent incidents in isolation. They can only be identified from more general information about the
relationship—information about the use of multiple tactics to control one’s partner, what Catherine Kirkwood calls a “web” of abuse (Kirkwood, 1993). This is the kind of violence that comes to mind when most people hear the term “domestic violence.”

*Violent Resistance*

What is a woman to do when she finds herself terrorized in her own home? At some point, most women in such relationships do fight back physically. For some, this is an instinctive reaction to being attacked, and it happens at the first blow—almost without thought. For others, it doesn’t happen until it seems the assaults will be endless if she doesn’t do something to stop him—so she fights back. However, for most heterosexual women, the usual size difference between them and their partner ensures that violent resistance won’t help and may make things worse, so they abandon violence and focus on other means of coping. For a few victims of intimate terrorism, eventually it seems that the only way out is to kill their partner (Richie, 1996; Walker, 1989).

The critical defining pattern of violent resistance is that the resistor, faced with an intimate terrorist, uses violence but not in an attempt to take general control over her partner or the relationship. Violence in the face of intimate terrorism may arise from any of a variety of motives (Swan & Snow, 2002; Walker, 1989). The resistor may (at least at first) believe that she can defend herself, that her violent resistance will keep her partner from attacking her further. That may mean that she thinks she can stop him right now, in the midst of an attack, or it may mean that she thinks that if she fights back often enough he will eventually decide to stop attacking her physically.

Even if she doesn’t think she can stop him, she may feel that he shouldn’t be allowed to attack her without getting hurt himself. This desire to hurt him in return even
if it won’t stop him can be a form of communication (“What you’re doing isn’t right and I’m going to fight back as hard as I can”) or it may be a form of retaliation or payback, along the lines of “He’s not going to do that without paying some price for it.” In a few cases, she may seek serious retribution, attacking him when he is least expecting it and doing her best to do serious damage, even killing him. But there is another, more frequent motive for such premeditated attacks—escape. Sometimes, after years of abuse and entrapment, a victim of intimate terrorism may feel that the only way she can escape from this horror is to kill her tormenter (Browne, 1987; O'Keefe, 1997).

*Situational Couple Violence*

The first two types of intimate partner violence may be what most of us think of when we hear the term “domestic violence,” but the most common type of intimate partner violence does not involve any attempt on the part of either partner to gain general control over the relationship. The violence is situationally-provoked, as the tensions or emotions of a particular encounter lead someone to react with violence. Intimate relationships inevitably involve conflicts, and in some relationships one or more of those conflicts may escalate to violence. The violence may be minor and singular, with one argument at some point in the relationship escalating to the level that someone pushes or slaps the other, is immediately remorseful, apologizes and never does it again. In other cases it is a chronic problem, with one or both partners frequently resorting to violence, minor or severe.

The separate violent incidents of situational couple violence may look exactly like those involved in intimate terrorism or violent resistance. The difference is in the general power and control dynamic of the relationship, not in the nature of any or all assaults. In
situational couple violence there is no general pattern of exerting coercive control. It is simply that one or more disagreements leads to violence. The violence may be frequent if the situation that provokes it is recurring, as when one partner frequently feels that the other is flirting and the confrontations over that issue regularly lead one or the other of them to lash out. And the violence may be quite severe, even homicidal. What makes it situational couple violence is that it is rooted in the events of particular situations rather than in a relationship-wide attempt to control.

Gender, Sampling, and the Types of Intimate Partner Violence

There is now direct evidence supporting my 1995 hypothesis that different sampling strategies tap different types of intimate partner violence, thereby producing the two bodies of research literature that differ so dramatically in the observed gender symmetry/asymmetry of intimate partner violence. A number of authors have operationalized the distinctions among the types, using questions focused on the spokes of the power and control wheel, the non-violent strategies that intimate terrorists use to try to maintain control over their partners.

Table 3 presents the evidence regarding sampling strategies from two such studies, conducted by different authors, in different countries, with different types of samples, using data collected in different decades, and with different operationalizations of violence and control (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; Johnson, 2006). Graham-Kevan and Archer collected their data in England in the 2000s from university students, prisoners, shelters, and batterer intervention programs. Johnson used data collected by Irene Frieze in Pittsburgh in the 1970s from shelters, court records on protection from
abuse orders, flyers in laundromats, and a matched general sample of women who lived in the same neighborhoods as the women identified by other means. Although the exact numbers in the two studies differ somewhat, the patterns are the same: agency data are dominated by intimate terrorism and general samples are dominated by situational couple violence.

Of course, these sampling differences can only explain the observed differences in gender symmetry if the types of intimate partner violence are differently gendered. Table 4 presents data from the same two studies regarding the gendering of the three major types of intimate partner violence. Again, although the numbers are not exactly the same, the patterns are quite similar. Intimate terrorism is perpetrated largely by men, violent resistance by women, and situational couple violence roughly equally by men and women.

Major Differences in Patterns of Violence Among the Types

Because the interpersonal dynamics of power and control are quite different from those of conflict resolution, we would expect the trajectory of the associated violence to be quite different on average. In a culture that values equality, many intimate terrorists will face resistance that leads them to escalate the violence in order to maintain control. In most cases of situational couple violence, the couple will be upset by their own violence, and will take steps to address their conflicts peacefully. Thus, as expected, the evidence from multiple studies indicates major differences between the typical patterns of violence for intimate terrorism and for situational couple violence. Johnson (1999), using the 1970s Pittsburgh data, shows that 75% of the cases of intimate terrorism escalated
over time (28% for situational couple violence), 76% involved severe violence (28% for situational couple violence), and only 29% involved mutual violence (69% for situational couple violence). Graham-Kevan and Archer (2003) found the same patterns in Britain in the 2000s using different measures: 78% vs. 20% for escalation, 43% vs. 20% for severe violence, and 15% vs. 87% for mutuality. Ansara and Hindin (2010), using Canadian data, found frequent violence in 57% of their cases of intimate terrorism (compared to 8% for situational couple violence), and that 60% of their victims of intimate terrorism feared for their lives (as compared with 9% for situational couple violence. Thus, as expected, the typical patterns of violence in intimate terrorism and situational couple violence are quite different. It is important, however, not to use these data to minimize concerns over the potential danger of situational couple violence, which escalates and becomes severe in a substantial minority of cases.

Everything is Different

As studies have begun to appear that make distinctions among the types of intimate partner violence, over and over again we find that the types differ dramatically in terms of their causes and effects. Let’s begin with a few examples of consequences. Laroche (2005), using 1999 Canadian General Social Survey data and looking at data on previous partners, found that 21% of female victims of intimate terrorism reported serious injuries, as compared with 5% of victims of situational couple violence. Johnson, Conklin, and Menon (2002), using the 1970s Pittsburgh data, found that 50% of women victims of intimate terrorism reported very low marital satisfaction, as compared with 13% of those experiencing situational couple violence. Johnson and Leone (2005), using National Violence Against Women data, found that 79% of the women victims of intimate
terrorism scored above the median on a post-traumatic stress symptom list, as compared with 37% of those experiencing situational couple violence.

Turning to causes, we can begin with the dramatic gender effects found by Johnson (2006) in the Pittsburgh data: almost all (97%) of the intimate terrorism was perpetrated by men, but close to half of the situational couple violence was perpetrated by women.

Sugarman and Frankel’s (1996) meta-analysis of the literature on the relationship between gender traditionalism and intimate partner violence found a strong relationship (d = .80) for samples likely to be dominated by intimate terrorism, and a small and negative relationship for samples likely to be dominated by situational couple violence (d = -.14). What about marriage; is it a license to hit? Macmillan and Gartner (1999), using 1993 Canadian Violence Against Women Survey data on married and cohabiting partners, found a strong positive relationship between marriage and intimate terrorism (b = .58), but a strong and negative relationship with situational couple violence (b = -.62). Evidently for some men marriage is a license to use violence to control, but married couples are less likely than cohabiting couples to have their arguments escalate to violence. Finally, dramatic differences are found for so-called intergenerational transmission. Stith et al.’s (2000) meta-analysis of this large literature found a moderate relationship between childhood experiences of family violence and men’s perpetration of intimate partner violence, but only for samples likely to be dominated by intimate terrorism (d = .35). For samples likely to be dominated by situational couple violence, the relationship was minimal (d = .11).
Implications for Intervention

These are huge differences, and they suggest that we must make these distinctions if we wish to understand anything about the nature of intimate partner violence. They also suggest that our interventions might work differently for different types of intimate partner violence. When I first began to develop this typology (Johnson, 1995), I thought it likely that virtually all of the intimate partner violence encountered in shelters, law enforcement, and other agency settings was intimate terrorism. I was disabused of this misconception as soon as I operationalized the types and looked at the various sample types in the Pittsburgh data (Johnson, 1999). I found, to my surprise, that 29% of the violence in the court sample and 19% in the shelter sample was situational couple violence (see Table 2).

Figure 2 presents a summary of data from a number of studies that have been completed since then. The dark bars represent the informal data that I routinely collect in workshops for practitioners, asking them to estimate how many of their clients are involved in each of the major types of intimate partner violence. The light bars represent averages across studies that have operationalized the types in various settings. The patterns are quite dramatic. First, they indicate considerable variability across settings. For example, the research numbers show averages ranging from 15% at women’s shelters to 46% in batterer intervention programs to 82% in general survey data. Second, the data confirm the early finding that there is a significant representation of situational couple violence in agency settings.
Throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, shelters, the courts, batterer intervention programs, and other agencies that dealt with intimate partner violence developed their intervention strategies from the assumption that the vast majority if not all of the cases with which they deal are cases of intimate terrorism. For example, the dominant Duluth model for batterer intervention (Pence & Paymar, 1993) was developed in large part on the basis of women survivors’ descriptions of the patterns of power and control to which they had been subjected. Many states in the United States have policies that forbid couples approaches to intervention under the reasonable assumption that in cases of intimate terrorism couples counseling will be at best ineffective, at worst a serious threat to the safety of the victim. More recently, however, many agencies are seriously considering the advantages of differentiating among the major types of intimate partner violence (Kelly & Johnson, 2008). One reason is that the evidence is building that current intervention strategies are differentially effective. For example, one major study of the Duluth model found that although it was quite effective for cases of situational couple violence, results were quite disappointing for cases of intimate terrorism (Eckhardt, Holtzworth-Munroe, Norlander, Sibley, & Cahill, 2008). A second reason for considering differentiation is that a number of studies have now demonstrated the effectiveness of couples counseling for cases of situational couple violence (O'Farrell, Murphy, Stephan, Fals-Stewart, & Murphy, 2004; Stith, McCollum, & Rosen, 2011).

Although I would recommend some differential treatment of different types of intimate partner violence, safety concerns demand that all cases be treated as if they were intimate terrorism until the evidence is compelling that a specific case involves violent resistance or situational couple violence. All safety planning strategies should remain in
effect, and interventions should assume intimate terrorism until the evidence is compelling that another type is involved.

Once that evidence is compelling, differential treatment would be warranted. In cases of violent resistance, interventions for “perpetrators” could be tailored to look more like our interventions for survivors. Miller (2005) has shown that in many cases of batterer intervention groups for female perpetrators, this is already happening informally. In cases of situational couple violence, I would recommend (for safety reasons) that the tailoring of interventions begin with individual approaches in which each of the partners receives individual work on anger management, substance abuse, communication issues, or other problems that may be involved in the escalation to violence. In fact, batterer intervention programs built on the Duluth model already include modules that address such issues, and these could simply be adapted and supplemented for cases of situational couple violence. If these approaches appear to be helpful, and no new safety concerns arise, one could then consider introducing couple approaches to counseling. Stith and her colleagues have demonstrated the effectiveness of such approaches with clients who are rigorously screened to keep out cases of intimate terrorism (Stith, et al., 2011). In child custody disputes, custody and visitation matters tailored to the type of violence (Kelly & Johnson, 2008) might be in the best interests of the child and of the parents.

Conclusions

The big lesson here is that we make big mistakes if we don’t make big distinctions. The differences among the major types of intimate partner violence are huge. When we don’t make these distinctions in our research we are faced with what appear to be major contradictions in our data (e.g., the gender debate) and we come to incorrect conclusions
about the causes of intimate partner violence (e.g., intergenerational transmission). If we ignore these distinctions in our interventions, we treat violent resistors as if they were intimate terrorists, mandating them into programs to address their power and control issues when what they need is support for non-violent responses to their intimate terrorist partner. Or we deprive couples who have communication issues of the couples counseling that might help them to live together in peace. If we do make these distinctions, we will collect better data, develop more realistic theories, and design more effective intervention strategies.
Table 1: Heterosexual Intimate Partner Violence by Gender (General Survey Data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada, GSS, 2009</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand, young adults, 2002</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S., NSFH, 1988</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S., NFVS, 1975—the beginning</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Heterosexual Intimate Partner Violence by Gender (Agency Studies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada, Spousal Homicide, 1995-2005</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S., FBI, Partner Assault, 1996-2001</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.K., Emergency Rooms, 1988</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Barbara, CA, Police, 1983</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario, Family Court, 1982</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland, Divorce Court, 1966</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>8%</td>
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</table>
Table 3: The Biases of Major Sampling Plans (1970s Pittsburgh)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General Sample (n = 37)</th>
<th>Court Sample (n = 34)</th>
<th>Shelter Sample (n = 50)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intimate terrorism</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent resistance</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational couple violence</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*2000s Britain: Intimate terrorism by sample type: General sample = 13%, Shelter sample = 88%.
Table 4: Gender Symmetry/Asymmetry by Type of Violence (1970s Pittsburgh)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Husbands</th>
<th>Wives</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intimate terrorism</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent resistance</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational couple violence</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*2000s Britain: IT 87% male; VR 10% male; SCV 45% male
Figure 1: Intimate Terrorism/Domestic Violence

Adapted from Pence and Paymar (1993).
Figure 2: Percent Situational Couple Violence for Men in Different Settings

- Shelters: 25, 15
- Probation/parole: 35, 35
- Protection orders: 35, 29
- Batterer intervention: 35, 46
- Family court: 55, 70
- General sample: 70, 82

Legend:
- Staff perceptions
- Research
References


