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## Domestic Violence: It's Not About Gender—Or Is It?

Ever since Suzanne Steinmetz's 1977–1978 article on “battered husbands,” we have been hearing this lament—that the feminists are wrong, that women are as violent as men, that domestic violence is not about gender or patriarchy. As Fergusson, Horwood, and Ridder (this issue) put it, their work “suggest[s] the need for a broadening of perspective in the field of domestic violence away from the view that domestic violence is usually a gender issue involving male perpetrators and female victims and toward the view that domestic violence most commonly involves violent couples who engage in mutual acts of aggression” (p. 1116).

I want to make four major points in my response to the Fergusson, Horwood, and Ridder article, points that are equally relevant to other articles like it that continue to appear in our journals and in the general media suggesting that women are as violent as men in intimate relationships. First, there are three major types of intimate partner violence, only one of which is the kind of violence that we all think of when we hear the term “domestic violence.” Second, that type of intimate partner violence is, indeed, primarily male perpetrated and is most definitely a gender issue. Third, Fergusson, Horwood, and Ridder's article is *not* about that type of violence. In fact, it is hardly about violence at all. Fourth, serious errors of fact, theory, and intervention inevitably follow from the failure to

acknowledge the major differences among the three types of intimate partner violence.

### THREE TYPES OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

A growing segment of the domestic violence literature demonstrates that there is more than one type of intimate partner violence. I first presented this theoretical and conceptual argument at professional meetings in the early 1990s, with publications beginning to appear in 1995 (e.g., Johnson, 1993, 1995, 1996). Since that time, I have continued to present and publish papers that document the differences among major types of intimate partner violence, types that must not be conflated lest we make serious mistakes in our research, and in the policy recommendations that may follow from it (Johnson, 1998, 2001; Johnson & Cares, 2004; Leone, Johnson, Cohan, & Lloyd, 2004).

The importance of making such distinctions is also supported by other scholars' publications, some of which build upon my framework (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003a, 2003b), others of which come to the same conclusion from other perspectives (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2000; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Swan & Snow, 2002). It is no longer scientifically or ethically acceptable to speak of domestic violence without specifying, loudly and clearly, the type of violence to which we refer.

In my control-based typology of intimate partner violence, the three major types are distinguished from each other by the control context within which they are embedded. Control

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context is conceptualized at the level of the relationship rather than the immediate situation and is based on non-situation-specific dyadic information about the controlling and violent behaviors of both partners in the relationship. Briefly, the three types are (a) violence enacted in the service of taking general control over one's partner (*intimate terrorism*), (b) violence utilized in response to intimate terrorism (*violent resistance*), and (c) violence that is not embedded in a general pattern of power and control but is a function of the escalation of a specific conflict or series of conflicts (*situational couple violence*). As I do not plan to say much about violent resistance in this comment, I want to point out here that I purposely do not use the term *self-defense*. Violent resistance to intimate terrorism does not necessarily meet the legal definition of self-defense, and it is not always seen as self-defense by the women who respond violently to their partner's intimate terrorism. Thus, a question asking whether the violence was enacted in self-defense cannot identify violent resistance.

Although all three types of intimate partner violence can be either frequent or infrequent (within a relationship), and can range from relatively minor acts of violence to homicidal assaults, intimate terrorism is the type most likely to be frequent and brutal. Furthermore, it is the type that people bring to mind when they hear the term *domestic violence*. I am certainly aware that as scientists we can and do operationalize domestic violence quite precisely (although not necessarily consistently). Nevertheless, the term *domestic violence* carries real baggage with it that may not correspond to our operationalizations. When folks settle down to watch a movie on domestic violence, read a book about it, or critique a journal article analyzing it, they expect to learn about relationships in which controlling violence is a central feature. Thus, no matter how careful we are about spelling out our operationalization of domestic violence, we and our readers routinely fall into the trap of thinking that our conclusions apply to the prototype of domestic violence—intimate terrorism. Sometimes I wish we could abandon the term *domestic violence* altogether.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that our common sampling designs are heavily biased with regard to these different types of intimate partner violence. On the one hand,

agency samples gathered from shelters, hospitals, police records, or the courts are biased heavily in favor of intimate terrorism because intimate terrorism is the type of violence that is most likely to be repetitive and to escalate, thereby producing incidents that draw the attention of neighbors, injuries that lead to hospital visits, and terror that leads the victim to seek help from the police, shelters, or courts. On the other hand, general samples, such as the one used in the Fergusson, Horwood, and Ridder article, are heavily biased in favor of situational couple violence. These so-called random samples are dominated by situational couple violence for two reasons: (a) because situational couple violence is the most common type of intimate partner violence and (b) because refusals further reduce the number of victims or perpetrators of intimate terrorism who are interviewed (Johnson, 1995).

Looking at men only, Johnson (2001), using 1970s Pittsburgh data, found that the violence in a general sample was only 11% intimate terrorism, in a court sample was 68% intimate terrorism, and in a shelter sample was 79% intimate terrorism. Similarly, Graham-Kevan and Archer (2003a), using 2002 British data, found that the violence in a general sample was 33% intimate terrorism, whereas that in a shelter sample was 88% intimate terrorism.

If we do not operationalize distinctions among the types of intimate partner violence, and instead simply make generalizations about domestic violence from such biased samples, we create serious misconceptions. For example, feminist scholars make this mistake when we use numbers derived from general surveys to describe the extent of violence against women, such as that 50% of marriages involve domestic violence. We and our audiences think that we are speaking about intimate terrorism, whereas the numbers refer to situational couple violence, which is much more common than intimate terrorism. Another example is the current case, in which the authors make statements about domestic violence, implying intimate terrorism, when at best they have information about situational couple violence. I say "at best" because it appears to me that their findings actually have little to do with violence at all, let alone with intimate terrorism. I have more to say about this later, but first let me speak briefly to the general evidence on the gender issue.

INTIMATE TERRORISM IS PRIMARILY MALE  
PERPETRATED AND IS DEFINITELY  
A GENDER ISSUE

There are two types of evidence regarding the relationship between gender and the different types of intimate partner violence. First, there is indirect evidence derived from over 25 years of research that has not operationalized distinctions among the types of intimate partner violence. This evidence is indirect because it involves the comparison of findings from general survey samples that are biased in favor of situational couple violence with those from agency samples that are biased in favor of intimate terrorism. Second, there is direct evidence from the relatively small number of more recent studies that have actually operationalized the distinctions.

The most comprehensive indirect evidence comes from Archer's (2000) meta-analysis, in which he found that intimate partner violence in agency samples was heavily male perpetrated ( $d = .86$ ), whereas that in general samples was roughly gender symmetric ( $d = -.03$ ). Direct evidence comes from Johnson's (2001) finding that 97% of the intimate terrorism in a 1970s Pittsburgh sample was male perpetrated, compared with 56% of the situational couple violence. Other direct evidence comes from Graham-Kevan and Archer (2003a), who found in Britain that 87% of intimate terrorism was male perpetrated, compared with 45% of situational couple violence.

Another indicator of the relevance of gender is the relationship of intimate partner violence to traditional gender attitudes and misogyny. A summary of some of the indirect evidence can be found in Sugarman and Frankel's (1996) meta-analysis that found a strong relationship between traditional gender attitudes and male-perpetrated intimate partner violence in agency samples ( $d = .80$ ), a weak relationship in general samples ( $d = -.14$ ). Direct evidence comes from Holtzworth-Munroe's work, in which she finds that male perpetrators of intimate terrorism have significantly more misogynistic attitudes than do nonviolent men, whereas perpetrators of situational couple violence have the same attitudes toward women as do nonviolent men (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000).

Thus, although situational couple violence is nearly gender symmetric and not strongly related to gender attitudes, intimate terrorism

(domestic violence) is almost entirely male perpetrated and is strongly related to gender attitudes.

FERGUSSON, HORWOOD, AND  
RIDDER'S ARTICLE IS NOT ABOUT  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

A careful analysis of Fergusson, Horwood, and Ridder's operationalization of domestic violence suggests that not only is this article not about intimate terrorism, it is hardly even about violence. Their operationalization of so-called violence victimization, which they sometimes refer to as "domestic violence victimization," is collapsed by the authors into five categories. The first category represents no victimization and thus, of course, no violence ( $n = 279$ ). The so-called violence victimization begins with the collapsed Categories 1–2, in which only 2 of 258 respondents "reported physical assault (both minor)...." (p. 1109). Moving on to Categories 3–4, of 195 respondents, "only a small minority" (p. 1109) report physical assault and none report any injury or fear. Categories 5–6 involve 49 respondents, of whom "40% reported incidents of minor physical assault and just over 10% at least one incident of severe physical assault" (p. 1109). Finally, the most violent group of all, Category 7, involves 47 individuals, all of whom experienced physical assault and 55% injury, with "over a quarter" reporting fearfulness (p. 1109).

It appears that although the authors use the term *domestic violence* more than 145 times in this article, and they shock us with their report that "domestic conflict was present in 70% of the relationships" (p. 1103), in fact only about 17% of the relationships involved any violence at all and perhaps 2%–5% involved violence that produced injury or fear. This article is certainly not about intimate terrorism, a form of violence that has been shown in study after study to produce both fear and injury. It is hardly even an article about situational couple violence. It is essentially an article about the effects of all the nonviolent aggressive behaviors in a scale that is labeled as violence victimization, behaviors such as "cursed or sworn at you," "stomped off during a disagreement," "called you fat, ugly, or unattractive," and "accused you of being a lousy lover." This article has nothing to tell us about policies regarding the domestic violence faced by the terrorized women encountered in

our emergency rooms, police stations, courts, and shelters, women who have in almost all cases experienced not only fear, but terror, not only injury, but repeated and often severe injury.

#### ERRORS OF FACT, THEORY, AND INTERVENTION

Errors of fact follow from the failure to make distinctions among types of violence. Currently, the best known examples are related to the gender debate initiated by Steinmetz's (1977–1978) argument that there are as many battered husbands as there are battered wives. In fact, only situational couple violence, not intimate terrorism, is gender symmetric. Her mistake has been perpetuated through almost 30 years of sometimes acrimonious scholarly debate (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Kurz, 1989; Straus, 1999; Yllö, 1988), right up to the current case.

Similar errors will probably be found with respect to many other areas of knowledge about intimate partner violence. For example, although a major meta-analysis on so-called intergenerational transmission of violence finds a generally weak relationship between childhood experiences of family violence and adult perpetration of domestic violence (Stith et al., 2000), a more careful look at the results suggests that there is a weak relationship only for general survey studies (situational couple violence) and a moderate relationship for agency studies (intimate terrorism).

Furthermore, such errors of fact lead to errors of theory. In the gender debate, feminist theorists working primarily with agency samples that are dominated by intimate terrorism argue that gender theory or control theory must be the major sources of insight into the nature of domestic violence. Family violence theorists, working with samples dominated by situational couple violence, argue that theories of interpersonal conflict must be central. The recognition that these two groups of theorists are trying to explain different phenomena provides a simple approach to the theoretical impasse: different theories for different types of violence.

Finally, errors of theory lead to potentially life-threatening errors of intervention strategy and general policy. In Fergusson, Horwood, and Ridder's article, for example, a study of situational couple violence (to the extent that it

is about any violence at all) is presented as the basis for recommendations about policies that would be applied primarily to intimate terrorism. In spite of the authors' statement that "[t]hese findings are to some extent consistent with conclusions drawn by Johnson and Ferraro (2000), who believe that there are multiple forms of domestic violence" (p. 1113), they end by recommending shifts in our policies that would essentially treat those who enter our medical, social service, and criminal justice systems as if they were involved in situational couple violence, asking the couples to "work together to harmonize their relationships" (p. 1116).

There is a good reason why feminists do not recommend such an approach. Women who come into contact with these agencies are in most cases dealing with intimate terrorism, not situational couple violence. We would be asking women who are terrorized by their partners to go into a counseling situation that calls for honesty. We would actually encourage them to tell the truth to a partner who in many cases has beaten them severely in response to criticism and who might well murder them in response to their attempt to "harmonize."

#### WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE FROM THIS ARTICLE?

With regard to the gender issue, we can conclude that we have yet another study that suggests that situational couple violence is roughly gender symmetric. We need to remember, however, that this "symmetry" is a special kind, referring merely to the fact that as many women as men have committed at least one of the "violent" acts included in the scale, at least once in the past year. It does not follow that what we have is primarily "mutual acts of aggression," (p. 1113) for two reasons: (a) We have no data on frequency and (b) even if the frequency of violence were the same for men and women, it would not follow that the violent acts occurred during the same events. And of course, in this study, as in virtually all others in which we have the relevant data, even situational couple violence is asymmetric in the sense that men's violence produces more frequent and more severe injuries, thereby producing a fear (or even terror) that is quite rare when women are violent toward their male partners. My intention is not to justify or minimize women's violence but to

recognize it for what it is (mostly situational couple violence or violent resistance) and to design our theories and interventions appropriately.

On the central issue of this article, the effect of intimate abuse on mental health, the data speak loudly to the power of partner abuse. Even with a measure of so-called violence victimization that in this sample includes very little violence, the authors are able to demonstrate effects on a variety of mental health outcomes. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this comment put it, "There *are* harmful effects of psychological abuse.... Caustic, cruel forms of communication are corrosive to relationships and to personal well-being." Imagine how much stronger Fergusson et al.'s findings would have been had they actually operationalized intimate terrorism/domestic violence.

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