



Where Do “Domestic Violence” Statistics Come From and Why Do They Vary So Much?

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Domestic violence advocates and family violence researchers often appear to contradict each other when they describe and report on the extent and nature of intimate partner violence. Although the term “domestic violence” has a very clear specific meaning to advocates working in the domestic violence field, it is used in other ways in other contexts to cover many different types of couple conflict. This paper helps to clarify some of the misunderstandings, errors, and apparent contradictions that derive in part from these differences in language use, in part from not understanding where the statistics come from and what the strengths and limitations of the data are, and in part from wrongly treating “domestic violence” as a single phenomenon.

An Example

The importance of understanding differences among types of intimate partner violence and their representation in different data sources is most forcefully illustrated in the heated debate over the extent to which women are perpetrators of intimate partner violence. One of the surprising findings of Straus and his colleagues’ national surveys was that women were evidently as likely to utilize violence in response to couple conflict as were men. One family violence researcher chose to refer to these women’s violence against their partner as “the battered husband syndrome” (Steinmetz, 1977-78), suggesting that women’s violence against men represented the same sort of phenomenon as the male violence that was being reported to women’s shelters across the country. Feminist scholars strongly disagreed (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Pleck, Pleck, Grossman, & Bart, 1978), structuring the debate as a disagreement about the nature of family violence, assumed by both sets of scholars to be a unitary phenomenon. This set the stage for a decades-long, acrimonious debate about the role of gender in intimate partner violence, a debate that continues today (Dutton & Corvo, 2007; Gondolf, 2007; M. P. Johnson, Leone, & Xu, 2008). I will come back to this example later, to illustrate the importance of making distinctions among types of intimate partner violence and understanding the biases of various data sources.

Types of Intimate Partner Violence

I put domestic violence in quotes in the title because the various sources of violence statistics cover multiple types of intimate partner violence, only some of which involve the coercive controlling violence for which battered women’s advocates reserve the term “domestic violence.” The usefulness of various data sources can only be understood if we make some distinctions, and a number of different authors have proposed typologies of intimate partner violence or its perpetrators. All of these typologies have at least some confirmation in empirical work and the striking similarities among them suggest that the field is converging on reality. That reality is about patterns of behavior that go beyond specific violent acts or their consequences, patterns that have to do with issues of power and control.

My own work identifies three major types of intimate partner violence (M. P. Johnson, 2008). Two of the three major types of intimate partner violence involve general power and control issues. *Intimate terrorism*¹ is an attempt to take general control over one's 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 appear to have any number of short-term, specific goals, it is embedded in a larger pattern of power and control that permeates the relationship. This is the kind of violence that comes to mind when most people hear the term "domestic violence," it is the violence to which battered women's advocates refer when they use the term "domestic violence," and it is the violence that is captured in Figure 1, a widely used graphical representation of "domestic violence."



Figure 1: Domestic Violence/Intimate Terrorism (adapted from Pence & Paymar, 1993)

A number of authors have developed typologies of male batterers that distinguish between two subtypes of intimate terrorists (Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). Both types of intimate terrorists are misogynistic, impulsive, and approving of violence; they differ in terms of the source of their need to control their partner. *Dependent intimate terrorists*² are motivated by a desperate emotional need to hang on to their partner. They are not likely to be violent toward other individuals, but their strong emotional attachment to their partner makes them jealous and particularly likely to

become even more violent when their partner tries to leave them. *Antisocial intimate terrorists*³ are men who must have their own way, at home or elsewhere, and are willing to use violence to that end. They are attached not so much to a particular partner as to having whatever they want in a variety of situations.

*Violent resistance*⁴ is the use of violence in response to intimate terrorism, a response that may arise from a number of different motives. The resistor may believe that she can defend herself, that her violent resistance will keep the intimate terrorist from attacking her further. In cases, the resistor may simply feel that the intimate terrorist shouldn't be allowed to attack her without paying some price for it. In yet other cases, 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.

*Situational couple violence*⁵ is probably the most common type of partner violence, and 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 one or both partners to react with 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. However, it can be a chronic problem in some relationships, with one or both partners frequently resorting to violence. Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that such violence is always relatively mild—it can be quite severe, even homicidal.

A variety of studies, by different authors, in different places, using different data sets and different measures, have established that these major types of intimate partner violence are dramatically different from each other (Anderson, 2007, 2008; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; M. P. Johnson, 2008; M. P. Johnson & Leone, 2005; Rosen, Stith, Few, Daly, & Tritt, 2005).⁶ These studies have also established that different data sources give different access to the major types of intimate partner violence.

Sources of Statistics

There are two major sources of intimate partner violence statistics: survey data and agency data. Both are biased, but in different ways. Survey data, which involve self-reports from people who agree to answer an interviewer's questions, get almost exclusively at situational couple violence, telling us little or nothing about intimate terrorism or violent resistance. Agency data, sometimes third-party reports about an incident, sometimes interviews with agency "clients," get at a mix of the most serious cases of all three types of intimate partner violence, but are generally dominated by cases of intimate terrorism and resistance to it.

Survey Data

We in the survey business like to refer to our data as based on "representative samples" because the best of the surveys use scientific random sampling techniques to select the respondents to be interviewed.⁷ The truth, however, is that our final samples are anything but representative because 40% or more of the people

we contact refuse to be interviewed. This major source of bias is the reason that survey data include almost no reports of intimate terrorism or violent resistance—for two reasons. First, intimate terrorism is relatively rare to begin with, and second, both victims and perpetrators of intimate terrorism refuse to participate in surveys, the former out of fear of retribution from their partner, the latter from fear of exposure. A number of studies that have made distinctions among types of intimate partner violence have demonstrated this underrepresentation, finding that very little of the violence reported in such surveys is intimate terrorism (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; M. P. Johnson, 2006; M. P. Johnson, et al., 2008). As a result, survey analyses of the prevalence, causes, and consequences of intimate partner violence reflect only the patterns of situational couple violence.

The first level of bias, the nature of the sample, ensures that the violence uncovered in surveys is almost entirely situational couple violence. The second level of bias is introduced by the way the survey is presented to respondents. There are two major approaches to framing surveys about intimate partner violence. They are presented as either (a) surveys about family life or dating, or (b) surveys about crime, victimization, or safety issues. Because family life surveys generally lead up to the violence questions with assurances that family conflict is a normal part of family life, they encourage respondents to report on even the most infrequent and mild incidents of physical aggression. Thus, prevalence rates are relatively high and average consequences relatively less serious than are found in surveys framed in terms of victimization or safety. The crime victimization or safety framing, in contrast, leads respondents to think only about the most frequent or serious incidents as examples of “violence.” Thus, incidence rates are dramatically lower and average consequences more serious.

- **Family life or dating surveys** = situational couple violence. This approach gets at even the mildest forms of physical aggression. Incidence rates are high, consequences of the violence are on average relatively mild, and perpetration rates are roughly equal for men and women. Examples: the National Family Violence Surveys (Anderson, 2007; Straus & Gelles, 1990; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980), the National Survey of Families and Households (Anderson, 2007), the Dunedin (New Zealand) Longitudinal Survey (Moffitt, Krueger, Caspi, & Fagan, 2000), and the International Study of Dating (Straus, 2004). Many other more local surveys of student or community samples also fall into this category.
- **Crime, victimization, or safety surveys** = situational couple violence. This approach underrepresents the mildest forms of situational couple violence. Incidence rates are relatively low, consequences of the violence are relatively severe, and perpetration rates are higher for men than for women. Examples: National Crime Victimization Surveys (Rennison, 2003), the Canadian National Violence Against Women Survey (H. Johnson, 1996) and the U.S. National Violence Against Women Survey (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Agency Data

It is somewhat risky to generalize about agency data because they come from a wide variety of sources,

including law enforcement, the criminal courts, civil courts, family courts, hospitals and other health agencies, batterer intervention programs, and women's shelters. However, they all have one bias in common: only the most serious forms of violence come to their attention, violence that produces injuries, alarms neighbors, seriously frightens the victim, or so undermines a relationship that the victim turns to the divorce courts. Furthermore, in contrast to survey research, the pathways by which cases get into these systems do not typically allow for refusal to participate. Perpetrators and victims of intimate terrorism are therefore included. The few studies that have made distinctions among types of intimate partner violence indicate that 60-90% of the intimate partner violence in such agency data involves intimate terrorism (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; M. P. Johnson, 2006). Thus, these agencies are our best source of information about what advocates typically mean when they use the term "domestic violence."

Those same studies do indicate, however, that the amount of situational couple violence that comes to the attention of such agencies is not trivial, ranging from 10-30% depending upon the source. In other words what may have begun as an angry disagreement between two people has escalated into one person, typically the male, inflicting physical harm on the other. Situational couple violence does sometimes result in emergency room visits, police intervention, escape to a shelter, or divorce proceedings. However, what we see in these data are the most serious examples of this type of violence.

As with survey data, there is a second level of bias, but in this case it has to do with the specific agency involved in producing the data. Data from police agencies, criminal courts, and batterer intervention programs (most of which involve clients who are court-mandated into treatment) are of course biased by the processes through which law enforcement gets involved in cases of intimate partner violence. These involve the reporting of the violence by a bystander, the victim, or a friend or relative — sometimes, unfortunately, they involve the investigation of a death. These sources are therefore further biased in the direction of more serious and more prolonged violence. Although situational couple violence can be serious and prolonged, these sources are likely to be dominated by cases of intimate terrorism and violent resistance.

The biases of health provider data are more incident-focused, having to do simply with whether a specific incident produces an injury that requires medical attention. They therefore provide a more even mix of the three major types of intimate partner violence. There are also a growing number of health provider studies that interview all women patients rather than only those who present with injuries, thus including an even better representation of situational couple violence.

The primary source of civil court data is protection from abuse orders, requests for which are provoked by the fear instilled by the pattern of violence that is typical of intimate terrorism, but that can also be involved in repeated situational couple violence.

Women's shelter data are heavily biased in the direction of male-perpetrated intimate terrorism and female violent resistance, but women sometimes do seek help for a pattern of chronic situational couple violence. Although many shelters in principle serve male victims, the gender bias is unavoidable.

Finally, I want to point out that there are two major kinds of data that are based on agency samples. On one hand, the agencies themselves typically compile reports that do not go beyond the information that they routinely collect about cases of intimate partner violence. An example would be the Uniform Crime Reports, in which the FBI compiles nationwide data from police agencies about homicides, assaults, and other serious crimes (United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2006). On the other hand, there are hundreds of studies, both qualitative and quantitative, that interview samples from agency populations to gather in-depth information about the violence. Examples would include Campbell's work in health settings (Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998), Sullivan's work in shelter settings (Sullivan, Campbell, Angelique, & Eby, 1994), Ferraro's interviews with incarcerated women (Ferraro, 2006), Wood's interviews with incarcerated men (Wood, 2004), and a variety of studies of batterer intervention programs (Gondolf, 2002).

- **Police agencies, criminal courts, and batterer intervention programs** = intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and the most serious cases of situational couple violence. Numbers are small relative to the total incidence of all types of intimate partner violence, consequences of the violence relatively severe, and perpetration rates much higher for men than for women. Examples: Uniform Crime Reports (United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2006), state or local crime statistics or analyses of case reports.
- **Health providers** = injurious incidents of intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence. Numbers are small relative to the total incidence of all types of intimate partner violence, consequences of the violence on average more severe, screening almost entirely for women. Examples: Stark (Stark & Flitcraft, 1996), Campbell (Campbell, 2002), Chicago Women's Health (Leone, Johnson, & Cohan, 2007).
- **Protection from abuse orders** = mostly intimate terrorism with some of the more chronic situational couple violence. Numbers are small relative to the total incidence of all types of intimate partner violence, consequences of the violence relatively severe, and perpetration rates much higher for men than for women. Examples: (Frieze & Browne, 1989; M. P. Johnson, 2006)
- **Women' shelters** = primarily intimate terrorism, some severe situational couple violence. Numbers are small relative to the total incidence of all types of intimate partner violence, consequences of the violence quite severe, and perpetrators are almost entirely men, with some violent resistance reported by the women clients. Examples: (Sullivan & Bybee, 1999), (Pagelow, 1981), and most of the published qualitative research on intimate partner violence (e.g., Kirkwood, 1993)

What Questions Are Asked? What Questions Need to be Asked?

Inordinate Focus on Specific Acts of Violence

Most domestic violence statistics are based only on one or more questions about specific acts of physical

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violence, the most commonly used set being those of the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1990; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), in which the specific acts range from a push or a slap through an attack with a weapon. The most common summary of the results is simply whether the respondent's partner has engaged in any of the listed acts in the last twelve months (in some cases over the entire length of the relationship). In fact, it is uncommon even to include anything about the frequency of the violence, whether there were injuries, or if one is afraid of one's partner—nothing beyond the simple information that such-and-such a percent of the men or women in the sample had been at least pushed or slapped at least once in some specified time period. Sometimes we do not even know the specific questions asked—and the issue of specific questions is not a trivial one. For example, most measures, including the CTS, do not have any questions about sexual violence. Prevalence and gender patterns change quite dramatically if sexual violence is included (DeKeseredy, 2000).

Another important disadvantage of the list of violent acts approach is that it completely ignores the issue of consequences. A slap that loosens teeth and a slap that elicits laughter are treated as the same act. Adding information about consequences gets us closer to reality, and can make quite a difference in our understanding of the use of violence in intimate relationships. For example, in general survey samples simple counts of violent acts seem to suggest that women are as violent as men. Adding information about injury, fear, and psychological consequences changes that picture dramatically, showing that men's violence produces more injuries, more fear, and more severe psychological consequences (Kimmel, 2002; Stets & Straus, 1990).

Getting at Coercive Control

It is essential that we get beyond the focus on specific acts of violence or even their consequences, to make the broad distinctions among types of intimate partner violence that I discussed above. In order to do that, we have to ask questions about coercive control, the pattern of violent and non-violent acts that indicate whether or not one is dealing with intimate terrorism or violent resistance to it. When those questions are asked, and distinctions among types of intimate partner violence are made, many of the contradictions and confusions in the literature are cleared up (M. P. Johnson, 2008). One of the most dramatic examples of this clarification is the debate about the role of gender in intimate partner violence.

Back to the Example

Are women as likely to be violent toward their partners as are men, or is intimate partner violence primarily male-perpetrated? The answer depends on the type of violence. Data from the small number of studies that have asked questions about coercive control and made distinctions among types of intimate partner violence indicate that in heterosexual relationships intimate terrorism is primarily male-perpetrated, violent resistance is primarily a female response to that terrorism, and situational couple violence is perpetrated about equally by men and women (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; M. P. Johnson, 2008). In addition, Holtzworth-Munroe's work on types of male batterers indicates that misogynistic attitudes distinguish intimate terrorists from both non-violent men and men who are involved in situational couple violence (Holtzworth-Munroe, et al., 2000).

These studies also indicate that general survey samples are dominated by situational couple violence, whereas samples from agency settings (e.g., shelters, courts, law enforcement, and hospitals) are dominated by intimate terrorism and violent resistance. As a result, data in which the distinctions among types are not made can also be used as evidence regarding differences. For example, general survey samples generally show intimate partner violence to be perpetrated roughly equally by men and women — exactly what we would expect from samples dominated by situational couple violence. Agency samples consistently show that intimate partner violence is perpetrated primarily by men — what we would expect from samples dominated by intimate terrorism. Archer's (2000) influential review of the literature on "sex differences in aggression between heterosexual partners," often cited as support for gender symmetry, actually finds such symmetry only for general survey samples, with the few agency studies he reviews showing primarily male perpetration. And Sugarman and Frankel's (1996) review of the literature on "patriarchal ideology and wife-assault," often cited as evidence that gender attitudes are not related to men's intimate partner violence, actually finds no effect for general survey samples (situational couple violence), but strong effects for agency samples (intimate terrorism).

Lessons Learned

Most importantly, don't mix apples and oranges. There are three major types of intimate partner violence and they are dramatically different from each other. Be sure to be clear about the type to which you refer when you make statements about the nature of "domestic violence."

When reading the research literature or assessing statistics reported in the media, keep the major biases uppermost in your mind. Statistics or generalizations from general social surveys apply primarily to situational couple violence. Statistics or generalizations from agency-based studies, whether they be agency statistical reports or interviews with agency samples, apply primarily to intimate terrorism, and to some extent to the most severe forms of situational couple violence and violent resistance.

Resources

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¹ Other authors have referred to this violence variously as “coercive controlling violence” (Kelly & Johnson, 2008), “patriarchal terrorism” (M. P. Johnson, 1995), or “coercive control” (Stark, 2007).

² Holtzworth-Munroe calls these “borderline/dysphoric batterers.” Jacobson and Gottman call them “pit bulls.”

³ Holtzworth-Munroe calls these “generally violent/antisocial batterers.” Jacobson and Gottman call them “cobras.”

⁴ This type of intimate partner violence has been referred to elsewhere as “female resistance, or ”resistive reactive violence.” Although the literature also often refers to this as violence utilized in “self-defense,” I have avoided that terminology because violent resistance does not always involve self-defense as defined in the law.

⁵ Other authors have referred to this violence variously as “common couple violence” (M. P. Johnson, 1995), “family-only” battering (Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2000), male controlling interactive violence” (Johnston & Campbell, 1993), “conflict-motivated violence” (Ellis & Stuckless, 1996), or “fights” (Stark, 2007)

⁶ There is a fourth type, *separation-instigated violence*, that is sometimes found in divorce-court samples. In addition to cases of continuing situational couple violence or intimate terrorism, researchers have identified examples of estranged partners who become violent only in the face of imminent separation or divorce (Johnston & Campbell, 1993; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Finally, I have identified a fifth type, *mutual violent control*, that comprises two intimate terrorists vying for control of their relationship. This type appears in very small numbers in some samples and there is some debate about whether it is a true type or an artifact of the constraints of imperfect operationalization.

⁷ The survey sample can be from the general population or specific sub-groups, such as those receiving welfare, women of a certain age group, etc.