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Anne Carroll Baird
Morehouse College

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Differences in Types of Intimate Partner Violence: Implications for Public Policy

Anne Carroll Baird
Morehouse College

Abstract

Intimate partner violence has been recognized as a serious social problem in the United States since the 1970s, when the leaders in the Women's Movement became alarmed at victimization of women in their own homes by their husbands or boyfriends (Dobash and Dobash 1992). Women still make up 70 percent of all intimate partner homicides, and are twice as likely to be killed by an intimate partner as men are (Catalano, Smith, Snyder, and Rand 2009). The Anti Violence against Women Acts of 1994 and subsequent years have led to more uniform state policies on domestic violence and other violence against women, but have been used to justify intrusion into private homes, particularly with mandatory arrest laws (Davis, O'Sullivan, Farole, and Remple 2008). The law has not been successful at specific deterrence (Peterson 2008), but it has been more effective at punishment (Dixon 2008). Treating all domestic violence cases as though they were the same also has implications for treatment programs (Peterson 2008; Saunders 2008). In this article, I consider the importance of making distinctions among types of intimate partner violence, the effects of failure to do so, along with implications for research, advocacy, and treatment.

Perception versus Reality

The model of intimate partner violence that prevails in the media and public perception is that of the controlling male who inflicts increasingly harsh physical, emotional, and psychological harm on his partner until either she successfully leaves or he kills her (Johnson 2008). This prototype also sees women as equally at risk, regardless of social class, race, ethnicity, where they live, or other structural and cultural factors (Nixon 2010; Richie 2000). Reconciliation to save the marriage or relationship is viewed as an unsafe and foolish option (Baker 2001; Lehrner and Allen 2009). The research literature indicates that this model applies to small, but extremely dangerous proportion of partner violence, but it continues to be generalized to the whole (Johnson and Ferraro 2000). Contrary to the prevailing view, research reveals that while men predominate in inflicting serious injuries and using coercive tactics, both men and women are perpetrators, and both men and women are victims of partner violence (Archer 2000; Felson and Cares 2005; Lauritsen and Heimer 2008; Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz 1981; Tjaden and Thoennes 1998). Moreover, partner violence is not limited to heterosexual relationships, but is experienced in both male and female same sex relationships (Renzetti 1992). Partner violence often includes rape and sexual assault. Although men primarily commit these acts, women also commit them against men (Laruitsen and Heimer 2008). Even though partner violence does occur across categories of race, class, and ethnicity, both victims and perpetrators come disproportionately from the unemployed, minority, and other marginalized groups (Coker 2004; Dixon 2008; Richie 2000; Sokoloff and Pratt 2005).

Please address all correspondence to: abaird@morehouse.edu

Different Types of Partner Violence

Kuchschmitt and colleagues (2004:84) observe that recent research is finding that male perpetrators of violence against their partners are heterogeneous, and that their characteristics support theoretical explanations. The delineation of different types of male perpetrators can be compared with nonviolent men to further understanding of the trajectories leading to partner violence (Kuchschmitt, McLaughlin, and Petrie 2004). Researchers need to measure specific behavior, including hitting, shoving, or demeaning. Productive typologies should characterize the context of the violence, which is the interaction between the spouses and the nature of their relationship (Michalski 2005).

Johnson (1995; 2005) developed a typology based on the attempt to exert control over one's partner and the use of violence. His types are coercive controlling violence, violent resistance, situational couple violence, and a fourth type, which involves mutual coercion. The first two types are most readily adaptable for categorizing motive, relationship, and behavior.

Coercive controlling violence, which he also calls intimate terrorism, refers to the type of violence that most fits the prevailing stereotype of the violent, controlling male. Intimate terrorism aims at complete physical and psychological domination and control of one's partner. A man usually commits this type of violence, and this type of victimization is highly prevalent among women living in shelters. Intimate terrorism is also the prototype for the mobilization of the Antiviolence against Women Movement. In this type of violence, the partner inflicts such emotional and psychological harm that a woman would prefer the physical violence to the shame and abuse. When a woman kills her coercive controlling partner, it is more likely to be in a direct fight for her life, rather than lying in wait or killing him in his sleep (Stark 2007).

The type of partner violence that is most common is situational couple violence, which is mutual violence. In this type of violence disagreements escalate and conflicts advance to violence. It usually does not escalate over time in the marriage or relationship, but is more likely to be one-time or occasional event. A man may become violent only one time, be remorseful, and never repeat the violence. This type of violence can have painful effects on the couple and any children present, but it is entirely different from coercive controlling violence. Johnson stresses, however, that situational couple violence can also be deadly. He cautions that although each of the types of partner violence can vary in frequency and severity "... from relatively minor acts of violence to homicidal assaults, intimate terrorism is the type most likely to be frequent and brutal (Johnson 2005:1127).

The Utility of Typologies

Distinguishing between coercive controlling violence and situational couple violence can be a vital tool in advising people seeking help in a relationship. If a woman is a victim of intimate terrorism, advising her to seek couples counseling could put her at even greater risk, and would only give her coercive controlling partner another opportunity to frame the problem as being her fault, or as residing in the victim (Stark 2007). Shelters and agencies are designed to help women, get out of dangerous coercive controlling relationships, where they have a high probability of being killed. What is being done, however, is that in order to try to prevent the deaths of victims in these

coercive controlling relationships, victims of partner violence in general are urged to get out of the relationship (Mills 1999).

Most victims seeking help fall in the category of situational couples' violence. They may want to stay in their relationship and could be encouraged to seek either couples counseling or some other type of intervention. Not only shelters and social service agencies encourage women to leave the relationship. This extends to the offices of some prosecutors and court services, where it may be considered a victory when a woman leaves her partner, regardless of the context, her needs and wants, or the fit with her lived experience (Ford 1991). Both Ford (2003) and Baker (2001) argue that victims are denied agency when they are presented only the option of ending the relationship, often under threat of losing custody of their children.

A number of typologies of intimate partner violence are being developed. The extent to which they lead to better understanding, treatment, and prevention will depend on how well they represent the realities of people and their relationships. Typologies can be most useful as tools for comparison, but they are best used as guides, not as rigid categories, which would defeat the purpose of recognizing differences. With a better understanding of motivations and relationships, victims can make decisions on the most appropriate action in their situation.

Research, Violence Perceptions, and Social Movements

The violent, controlling male perpetrator is consistent with media representations and public perception, but this prototype is also engrained in theoretical paradigms and research, in public policy, particularly in the United States, legal and criminal justice systems (Peterson 2008; Davis et al. 2008; Mills 1999). Until recently, partner violence as a single type was predominant in both theoretical approaches and empirical research (Felson and Cares 2005; Sokoloff and Pratt 2005). This stems in part from the fact that early partner violence research had roots in the Women's Movement, and established radical feminism as the leading theoretical framework (Felson and Cares 2005). Centered in the operation and effects of male patriarchy and social change, radical feminism explains partner violence as an attempt by males to maintain dominance and control over women, within an established system of male privilege (Dobash and Dobash 1979). In this perspective, because only men are motivated to dominate and control, only men are perpetrators of partner violence. From the standpoint of radical feminism, men are perpetrators of violence and control and women are victims, hence their reluctance to consider different types of partner violence in terms of motive, relationship, severity of violence, and context.

The Antiviolence Movement and Sameness

One of the issues that delayed the development of partner violence subcategories was the opposition of some activist scholars and agencies (Cavanaugh and Gelles 2005), fearing that focusing on differences would either dilute the anti-violence movement or blame the victim if women were included in typologies (Nixon and Humphreys 2010). The assertion that partner violence could happen to anyone was important to the movement. Nixon and Humphreys state that sameness is one of the key mobilizing tools of social movements. In order for a movement to recruit new members and thrive,

it must have a common appeal that supporters share. There must be common values, goals, or problems about which members feel strongly. In the case of the antiviolence against women movement, this means that new recruits and financial supporters must be able to identify with the victim (Nixon and Humphreys 2010). For this to happen, the victim must appear to be like them. This is evidenced in publications and websites of antiviolence advocacy organizations. Moreover, the antiviolence movement's ideology of change promotes the theme that partner violence could happen to any woman, regardless of who they are, where they live, their income, education, race/ethnicity, or station in life. Black feminists contend, however, that individuals experience each of the status factors differently and in different combinations. Failure to consider this was a main factor for feminists who lobbied for the Violence against Women Act and accepted its incorporation into the crime act (Daly 1994). They were not conscious of differences, or of how these differences could interact in the lives of victims of partner violence (Richie 2000).

Scholar-activists wanted change; their research, their community advocacy, and the treatment programs they sponsored in women's shelters reflected this goal. These programs initially focused on the need for men to recognize male dominance as the cause of their violence. These activists sought to change institutions, and carefully guarded the public impression of "battered women" in their scholarship and community advocacy. Radical feminists view society as a system in which men, not women, are the perpetrators of violence because men have the power and want to maintain it. Some activist scholars cautioned that if women were seen as perpetrators of violence, they could then be blamed for their own victimization suffered at the hands of their male partners (McCloskey 2007). Therefore, work for change maintained a single focus, which was not to the advantage of most victims of partner violence or for development of treatment programs for their abusers (Strolovitch 2006). They were less concerned about determining the victim's relationship and the meaning of violence to her life than about initiating social change that would protect women from battery. (Baker 1999; Daly 1994). Antiviolence agencies and scholar-activists were inclined to account for any women's violence in their research findings entirely as a form of resistance to violence committed against them. Thus, they would agree with Johnson (2005) that women sometimes used violent resistance, but unlike Johnson, they interpreted any violence by women as a way of resisting a violent, controlling male partner.

Intersectionality

Collins (1998) has pointed to the need for considering how various structural factors, such as race/ethnicity, class, and gender, jointly produce inequalities, and how these interlocking intersections affect intimate partner violence. Collins also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the lived experiences of people if we are to understand their behavior. This would counteract the tendency to focus on a single type of partner violence. Treating all types of partner violence as the same has led to the similar treatment of men, and increasingly of women, who engage it (Hirschel, Buzawa, Patavina, and Faggiant 2008). This holds, regardless of the relationship, the context, or the wishes of the people involved. Moreover, it has encouraged the treating of all partner violence as fitting the pattern of the violent, coercive, controlling male. Using the intersection-

ality paradigm could be especially useful in determining what approach to treatment would work best for a given individual.

Johnson (2005) attempts to resolve the question of whether women can be violent by distinguishing context. Researchers using data from shelters and agencies are sampling from a population of victims of coercive controlling, violent men. For most of these women, intimate terrorism is a reality in their everyday life. It is uncertain what proportion of perpetrators fit in this category, but there are estimates of 10 to 20 percent (Johnson 2005; Archer 2003). Data from surveys such as National Crime Victimization Survey and the National Violence against Women Survey find a smaller proportion of coercive, controlling men, since their samples drawn from the population as a whole, rather than from shelters and hospital emergency rooms.

The Consequences of Not Differentiating Among Types

Distinctions among types and contexts of partner violence have far-reaching implications for theory and research, public policy and prevention, as well as for treatment of victims and offenders. (Cramer 2009; Dixon 2008; Nixon and Humphreys 2010; Saunders 2008). Similarly, failure to make these distinctions among types of intimate partner violence has multiple consequences, both intended and unintended. The prototype of the violent coercive male has been used to justify warrant-less arrest laws for probable cause in cases of partner violence. Such laws now exist in all states, varying by state on whether warrant-less arrest is mandatory, preferred, or allowed (Buzawa and Buzawa 2008). Treating all intimate partner violence calls to police the same in the decision to arrest contributes to an increase in female and dual arrests and in the number of people who have criminal records (Hirschel et al. 2008). Since young African American men have high rates of previous arrest and incarceration, these laws disproportionately affect them. Moreover, young African American women who have been incarcerated for minor drug offenses are afraid to call the police if they are being assaulted because they know that they have a high likelihood of being arrested (Richie 1996; 2005). Some states and police districts include preferred arrest in cases of violence for other people who live in the household, regardless of their relationship to the perpetrator. The first Violence against Women Act was passed in 1994 as a part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. Through this act, Congress has provided funding for programs for the criminal justice system and encouraged new policies, such as presumptive arrest for domestic violence. Thus, the net continues to widen, such that private behavior is increasingly criminalized and placed in the public domain. (Davis et al. 2008; Davis, Smith, and Taylor 2003).

Conclusion

Distinguishing among types of offenders could reduce unnecessary arrest. It could also reduce the criminal justice and other economic costs of intimate partner violence. Treatment programs hold promise for situationally violent couples, but not for coercive controlling cases. In addition, providing appropriate types of treatment intervention for situationally violent couples could ease emotional stress and later potential for violence of children involved, having a positive impact on communities.

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