

MALE VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A SUBSTANTIVE AND METHODOLOGICAL RESEARCH REVIEW

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This substantial article examines the issues of men who are victimized by domestic violence in heterosexual relationships. Over the past several years, there has been increasing attention to the issues of men who are victimized by heterosexual domestic violence, most of which is based on research done that is based on the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) developed by Murray Straus and Richard Gelles. In this current paper, Kimmel addresses the research that suggests men are victimized as often as women from both substantive and methodological perspectives. Through the process, Kimmel also addresses the CTS and raises substantive issues with the continued use of this tool to examine domestic violence.

Kimmel notes that the language (both media and in much of the specialized literature and theory) describing domestic violence has increasingly come to be that of gender symmetry. Review of the research (Fierbert, 1997, Archer, 2000) found that between 79 and 82 empirical and 16 review articles that demonstrated gender symmetry. As Kimmel notes, these studies “raise troubling questions” about what has come to be accepted as relatively common knowledge about domestic violence – that it is something men do to women, that it is one of the leading causes of serious injury to women, and that it is one of the world’s most widespread public health issues. Beyond this, however, the research suggesting gender symmetry raises far more questions than it supposed answers. These questions largely revolve around what gender symmetry really means: do women hit men as often as men hit women, an equal number of men and women hit each other, is the motivation for using violence symmetrical, or does it refer to the consequences?

Based on this opening, Kimmel begins to dissect that data that has been gathered thus far. Before this, however, Kimmel raises two key questions that he suggests must be addressed by those who argue for gender symmetry. First, the dramatic disproportion of women in shelters and hospitals -- if domestic violence is symmetrical, then why are the rates so asymmetrical when looking at serious injuries. Secondly, “claims of gender symmetry in marital violence must be squared with the empirical certainty that in every single other arena of social life, men are far more disproportionately likely to use violence than women” (p. #4). Why is it only in this sphere of social life that violence is symmetrical?

Types of Data

There are two main types of data that help explain domestic violence. Crime Victimization Studies are based on large-scale data while “Family conflict Studies” measure aggression between married or cohabitating couples. These two data sets measure very different things and as a result, come to very different conclusions about domestic violence.

Crime Victimization Studies examine all forms of crime victimization regardless of type or relationship between perpetrator and victim, and are based on nationally representative samples. The results on

domestic violence tend to show much lower rates than do Family Conflict Studies, but also a much greater gender asymmetry as well as much greater harm.

Family Conflict Studies, on the other hand, are based on one partner in a currently co-habiting relationship. As such, they tend to be much smaller in scale and the degree to which they are nationally representative is suspect. These studies tend to have a higher rate of violence, but also show lower levels of injury and much more gender symmetry.

The Conflict Tactic Scale

CTS frames domestic violence as a form of marital or family conflict. As such, it becomes understood as something that results from a bad mood or being tired rather than from an attempt to control the other partner. In addition, because it only asks about incidents in the last year, excludes sexual assault, and only includes currently co-habiting partners, the CTS conflates the issues of domestic violence. By only examining the incidents in the last year, there is no way to evaluate the ongoing dynamics of power and control that may be being exerted. Only examining currently co-habiting couples excludes the existence of post-relationship; and the exclusion of sexual assaults means that this form of domestic violence is severely undercounted (a form which is consistently and overwhelmingly gender asymmetrical).

In short, the design of the CTS removes the acts of violence from any context, and takes no account of the circumstances in which domestic violence. “Thus, if she pushes him back after being severely beaten, it would be scored as a “conflict tactic” for each. And if she punches him to get him to stop beating the children, or pushes him away after he has sexually assaulted her, it would count as one for her, none for him” (p. # 9).

CTS also fails to examine who initiates the violence. Data from a variety of sources indicates that women are much more likely to use violence defensively; while men are much more likely to use violence initially.

Kimmel suggests that there are different motivations for the use of violence – “expressive” (in the heat of anger, to get one’s point across, etc.) or “instrumental” (to control, subdue, or reproduce subordination). CTS does not examine motivation – only what was done, thereby ignoring these different motivations.

Finally, Kimmel argues that gender differences in the use of violence are large and consistent – men use violence in a number of venues, both public and private, where as women are much less likely to. This raises the question in regard to the CTS, “why would women hit men inside the house at roughly equal numbers but almost never commit violence towards men – or women – outside the home?” (p. #10).

Retrospective Analysis and Reporting Bias

The CTS relies on retrospection – asking people to accurately remember what happened during the past year. Since memory tends to serve our current interests, relying solely on memory may bias the substantive findings of any research.

In addition, however, much of the available research suggests that both women and men, in different direction, misrepresent their experiences and use of violence. Although it is argued that men are likely to under-report being hit by a female partner, while women are likely to over-report to serve their own interests, the available data suggests otherwise. Men tend to **under-estimate** their use of violence, while women tend to **over-estimate** their use of violence. Simultaneously men tend to **over-estimate** their

partners use of violence while women tend to **under-estimate** their partners use of violence. Thus, men will likely over-estimate their victimization, while women tend to underestimate theirs.

As evidence of this, men are **more** likely to call the police, press charges and less likely to drop charges than are women (see Schwartz, 1987, Rouse, et al, 1988, Kincaid, 1982, and Ferrante, et al, 1996).

Clearly, these rates of misrepresenting their use of and victimization by violence, has enormous implications on the findings of a report based on memory.

Causes and Consequences of Violence: Severity and Injury

CTS does not measure consequences of violence (i.e.: injury) or the causes of the assault. This also, clearly, has dire implications for women and for the findings of any research. The CTS combines all forms of violence – equating a slap with an assault using a weapon. Any gender symmetry that is found in the use of violence tends to be clustered at the lower end of violence. The injuries received from assaults in relationships are clearly gendered – women are harmed where as men are not; and women tend to be more severely harmed than men. As Frude, 1994, states, “both husbands and wives may be said to be ‘aggressive’ but many more husbands are violent.” Homicides that result from assaults are also misrepresented by the CTS. Clearly, “couples” in which one spouse murdered the other are not “couples” according to the CTS and are thus excluded from the study. But homicides are overwhelmingly gender asymmetrical – far more men than women murder their spouses.

How to Understand Use of Aggression in Domestic Life

Depending on what one wishes to examine will determine whether one prefer to use the CTS or crime victimization studies. The CTS *may be* a better tool at predicting types of aggression (recognizing the limits of failing to explore sexual assault or assaults by former spouses); or what Kimmel has described as “expressive” violence. For measuring “instrumental” violence – violence used to achieve control, injury or terror – the CTS is decidedly **not** an appropriate tool.

Men appear to choose to use violence against their partners or ex-partners when they fear that their control (*in* the relationships, *over* their partner) is breaking down. As such, men’s use of violence can be understood as restorative, retributive and retaliatory – a tool to regain their position of control and dominance in the relationship. This understanding of control-motivated, instrumental violence is particularly important to understand claims of gender symmetry. As Kimmel states, “control-motivated instrumental violence is experienced by the men not as an expression of their power but as an instance of its collapse. The men may feel entitled to experience that control over women, but at the moments when they become violence, they do not feel that control. Masculinity, in that sense, has already been compromised; violence is a method to restore one’s manhood and domestic inequality at the same time” (p. #18).

The difference that Kimmel explores between instrumental and expressive violence is important not only in understanding the purpose, but also in the frequency, severity and initiation. It provides a way to understand the use of violence as part of a systematic pattern of control and fear, as opposed to an isolated expression of frustration or anger.

Why be Concerned with Women’s Violence Toward Men

The research suggesting that violence in relationships is gender symmetrical is based largely on the Conflict Tactics Scale – a scale that does not address the full spectrum of violence and abuse, nor

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attempts to improve our understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence. All other available data suggests, quite strongly, that domestic violence, like all other forms of violence, is greatly gender asymmetrical – with men perpetrating the majority of the violence. Kimmel concludes the paper with a number of reasons why, despite this, activists and advocates should, in fact, be concerned with women's violence against men.

Firstly, all victims of violence deserve compassion, support and intervention.

Secondly, acknowledging women's violence can provide us with information and a way to better understand violence in gay male or lesbian couples.

Third, examining women's use of violence can better illuminate the dynamics of men's violence against women. Since women's violence is often retaliatory or self-defense, it may help to expose some of the ways men use violence to control women, and women's perceived absence of options other than fighting back.

Fourth, acknowledging women's violence is important because women using violence in a domestic relationship increases their risks for more severe retaliation by men.

Fifth, men benefit from efforts to reduce men's violence against women. The efforts to increase services and supports for battered women have worked to reduce the incidence of domestic murder of men by 70% since 1977.

In short, women's violence against men in domestic relationships does happen, but it is different than men's violence – it is far less injurious, and less likely to be motivated by a desire to dominate or control their partner. As Kimmel states, "Compassion and adequate intervention strategies must explore the full range of domestic violence – not only that both women and men are capable of using violence, but also the different rates of injury, the different types of violence, (including sexual assault, stalking, and post-relationship violence). Such strategies must also understand the differences between violence that is an expression of family conflict and violence that is instrumental to the control of one partner over another" (p. #23). While expressive violence may be more symmetrical (although excluding sexual assaults, stalking and post-relationship violence suggests that this form of violence too is more asymmetrical than the data from CTS suggests – Kimmel suggests a gendered difference of ¼ women and ¾ men); instrumental violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men – over 90%.

"Men are more violent than women – both inside the home and in the public sphere. 'It is misleading [and dangerous] to characterize marital violence as mutual violence' (Fagan and Browne, 1996, p. #169). The home is not a refuge from violence, nor is it a site where gender differences in the public sphere are somehow magically reversed" (p. #24).

Kimmel's paper clearly demonstrates, on both a methodological and substantive level, that the gender symmetry argument of domestic violence falls short. In his opinion without basis and the continued use of this argument not only prevents us from being able to work towards real solutions, but it places women at continued (and increasing) risk.

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