Responding to Spousal Violence: Does Gender Matter?

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Chapter 10

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Research on domestic violence has documented a persistent gender difference in partner violence: Men are more likely than women to be violent and male aggression is viewed more negatively than female aggression. Yet few studies have explained why this is the case. In this chapter, we explore the sources of this gender difference in the perceptions of partner aggression. Using a vignette describing a violent episode between a heterosexual couple, we assess the mediating effect of perceived level of danger on spousal aggression. Findings suggest there are significant differences in perceptions based on gender of perpetrators and gender of respondents. Male violence on a female victim was rated as more serious than female violence on a male victim. Possible explanations for these findings are explored.

INTRODUCTION

Spousal violence is a major topic in the field of domestic violence. The problem has generated much interest among researchers and service providers. While research on spousal aggression has traditionally focused on male-to-female violence, a new wave of empirical studies has challenged the fairness and adequacy of this one-sided approach to the problem. In recent years, new data are emerging that shows women also engage in physical aggression with their
male partners (George 2003; Nicholls and Dutton 2001; Straus 1993, 2005). Although women do not use force and engage in violence as much as men do, findings from more recent research suggest that female aggression is not as rare and isolated as previously thought (Mills 2003; Nicholls and Dutton 2001). In fact, violence and aggression is on the rise among young women (Shook et al. 2000; Williams and Frieze 2005).

How does the public respond to spousal violence? Are domestic assaults by men and women viewed as equally damaging? Previous research suggests that male and female violence are judged differently. People tend to react more negatively to a man than a woman when either is engaged in violence (Aras and Johnson 1989; Feather 1996). In this study, we examine college students' perceptions on spousal violence. Specifically, we assess how a violence perpetrator's gender affects students' perception of and response to spousal abuse. Advocacy and political action by the public with respect to domestic violence is strongly motivated not only by crime rates, but by the perception of the severity of crime. Public awareness is crucial to the prevention of domestic violence.

Both women and men can be perpetrators of spousal violence. Yet female aggression exists to a greater degree than is currently recognized. Although men tend to harm women at greater rates, women are also frequently aggressive in intimate settings. The work of Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) is particularly important in drawing the public attention to female-perpetrated physical violence. Using data from a national family violence survey, they found that nearly equal numbers of husbands and wives committed violent acts against each other. These findings were supported by others (Archer 2000; Mills 2003; Steinmetz and Lucca 1988). As research on domestic violence has developed and expanded (Anderson 2002; Coney and Mackey 1999; Stacey, Hazlewood, and Shupe 1994; Stacey and Shupe 1983; Steinmetz and Lucca 1988), we have seen a greater awareness of the problem. Today both the public and academia contend that spousal violence, either committed by men or women, is a social problem requiring attention and solutions.

SPOUSAL VIOLENCE

Research on spousal violence was stimulated by the Women's Movement. As concern about women battered by their husbands caught the public's attention in the 1970s, both academia and activists started to treat spousal violence as a social rather than personal problem. Since then, it has developed and remained a major focus of family studies.

Spousal violence most often refers to violent confrontations between married or cohabiting couples. A vast body of literature suggests that this is a serious problem. Depending on survey measures and population, the incidence of spousal violence ranges from 28 to 33 percent of surveyed couples (White and
Kowalski 1998). Different research tools and methods uncover different kinds of intimate spousal violence. The means used to measure domestic violence strongly influence the results found; for example, studies of reported domestic violence and extrapolations of those studies show women preponderantly as victims and men to be more violent, whereas the survey-based Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) tends to show men and women to be equally violent.

Clearly there is lack of consensus on the extent of gender differences in the experience of spousal aggression. For several decades, researchers have been studying the reported incidence of physically aggressive acts within marriages, specifically incidents involving slapping, hitting, throwing, and punching. Early research reported inconsistent findings regarding gender differences in heterosexual relationship aggression. Brush (1990) studied the incidence of acts of violence in marital relationships using quantitative data from a randomized national sample. Findings from that study indicate no significant differences between men and women in committing violent acts of hitting, shoving, or throwing objects at one’s spouse. However, other studies found that women had an equal or higher incidence of engaging in aggressive acts toward their partners (Hendy et al. 2003; Jackson, Cram, and Seymour 2000). More recent findings suggest that women are more likely than men to engage in acts of violence, but males do more damage when they hit (Capaldi, Kim, and Shortt 2007; Whitaker et al. 2007; Williams and Frieze 2005).

The gender of the aggressor affects how an aggressive act is perceived. The public tends to perceive the male abuser as more responsible for the violence than the female abuser. The gender of the aggressor also influences people’s ratings of the “acceptability” of spousal violence. Several studies reported differences in participants’ views depending upon the aggressor’s gender. In one experiment, participants were presented with two scenarios—one in which a woman slapped her male spouse and the other in which a man slapped his female spouse (Arias and Johnson 1989). It was found that participants perceived the woman’s act less negatively. In addition, there were four situations in which both men and women felt that slapping was “justified” in a relationship: self-defense, the defense of a child, sexual infidelity by the victim, and reciprocation of violence initiated by the victim. Other studies measuring perceptions of male-perpetrated versus female-perpetrated domestic violence arrive at similar findings—that violence by women is not viewed in the same light as violence by men (Feather 1996; Harris and Cook 1994). Findings from these studies point to differences in the perceptions of domestic aggression based upon gender of the perpetrator as well as upon the “reasons” behind the violence.

To understand how gender influences people’s perceptions of aggression in which they are not personally involved, we need to take into consideration not only the gender of the aggressor, but also the gender of the observer. Past studies suggest that the gender of the observer mediates the perceived level of
an aggressive act. In one study, although few differences were found between male and female observers in their ratings of the harmfulness of an aggressive act, researchers found that differences that did exist were in the direction of men perceiving the aggression as less harmful (Harris and Knight-Bohnhof 1996). Findings reported by others suggest that women on average perceive aggression as more serious than do men (Bagly and Steffen 1986; Fiebert 1996; Harris and Miller 2004).

Spousal violence is a substantial public health problem. It has serious consequences and costs for individuals, families, communities, and society. Recent findings suggest that aggression in American families has become more complex (Archer 2006). Therefore, it is imperative that we study the public’s perception in order to determine if they believe that female-perpetrated domestic violence qualifies as a social problem. In addition, eliciting a long-term change to these perceptions about who commits and who suffers from domestic violence cannot happen if we do not first know what is believed about domestic violence.

Furthermore, examining perceptions of domestic violence may help scholars understand why perpetrators and victims are treated differently based upon their gender. A better understanding of gender differences can potentially improve the services and treatment available to both the victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. Changing public perception of domestic violence could possibly lead to a greater availability of services to male victims, which are currently almost nonexistent. Conversely, female batterers could potentially benefit from treatment/therapy programs that, so far, have mainly benefited only male abusers. In addition, if people are aware of what constitutes domestic violence and who perpetrates it, research may lead to a better understanding of the misunderstandings surrounding this issue, including what people believe constitutes an abusive relationship versus what they may perceive as a "normal" amount of violence.

Domestic violence is violence no matter the gender of the perpetrator or amount of damage done and should not be tolerated if the perpetrator is a woman or a man. The majority of society correctly perceives male-perpetrated domestic violence as a great danger to female victims. Massive campaigns aimed at educating the public about the dangers of domestic violence can certainly be credited with this awareness. However, if people are unaware that women can be as violent as men, it is unlikely that perceptions of gendered behavior are going to change.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

A physically violent act, when committed by a woman, is judged less harshly than the same act committed by a man. For instance, Harris and Cook (1994) found that participants judged a battery incident committed by a wife to
be less serious than the same incident committed by a husband. Similarly, Harris and Knight-Bohnhoff (1996) reported that participants rated a slap by a man to be less acceptable than the same action by a woman. However, few studies explore the sources of these gender differences. It is commonly assumed that these gender differences result from people perceiving men to have the ability to incur more physical damage than females. Although previous research points to some tentative conclusions about how the gender of aggressor and observer influences the perception of aggression, there is not yet enough research in this area to justify any firm conclusions. In this study we assess college students’ perceptions of spousal violence. We are interested in the effect of gender on attitude toward spousal aggression. Our hypotheses are concerned with three issues: (1) whether a gender difference exists in the perceived level of danger of a violent act, (2) whether an observer’s age affects his or her response to spousal violence, and (3) how a perpetrator’s gender influences respondents’ consideration of the appropriate course of actions in response to violence. Drawing upon earlier research, we put forward the following hypotheses:

1. Respondents will report a higher level of danger associated with violence perpetrated by a man than the same act perpetrated by a woman.
2. Female respondents will perceive a higher level of danger related to spousal violence than will male respondents.
3. Younger respondents will perceive spousal violence as more dangerous than will older respondents.
4. Divorce and separation are more likely to be considered a proper course of action with a male aggressor than with a female aggressor.

METHODS

Data come from a survey conducted in a university in the Northwest region of the United States. Participants in the study were 109 undergraduate students. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Each participant received a short vignette that was specifically constructed for this study. The vignette detailed a hypothetical spousal violence scene in which the names of the perpetrator and victim were transposed, creating two scenarios: one with a female perpetrator and her male victim and the other depicting a male perpetrator and his female victim. Twenty questions were used to measure participant perceptions of the domestic violence scenario depicted in the vignette.

Out of the 109 participants, 52 received the domestic violence vignette with a female aggressor. For the remaining 57 respondents, the aggressor depicted was a man. The vignette version was distributed randomly to each participant. The details of the sample are summarized in Table 10.1.
Table 10.1
Respondents' demographic information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received a female-perpetrated version</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received a male-perpetrated version</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>54.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>56.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received a female-perpetrated version</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>51.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received a male-perpetrated version</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>48.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand total</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 25</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>85.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 and older</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FINDINGS**

Consistent with our hypothesis, the results in table 10.2 show that male violence was viewed as more dangerous than female violence. While the mean score for male violence was 4.60, the mean score for female violence was 4.12. There is clearly a gender difference in participants' perceptions. Female students perceived a higher level of danger in spousal violence than male students. As table 10.3 reveals, women reported a mean of 4.22 for the level of perceived danger of the domestic violence situation for the female-perpetrated version and a mean of 4.83 for the male-perpetrated version. Men perceived the violence by both males and females as less severe than did the female students. Specifically, they reported a mean of 3.81 for the situation's level of danger when it was female perpetrated and a mean of 4.27 when it was male perpetrated.

Age differences were also found in participants' levels of perceived danger resulting from the physical aggression depicted in the vignette. For traditional college students (i.e., ages 17–24 years old), the mean score for the female-perpetrated version was 4.16, while the mean for the male-perpetrated version was 4.56. The mean score for nontraditional students (age 25 and older) was 3.86 for the female-perpetrated version and 4.78 for the male-perpetrated version. Comparing means within each version, this translates to a mean of 4.16 for the younger age group versus a mean of 3.86 for the older age group for the female-perpetrated version. For the male-perpetrated
Table 10.2
Mean scores of perceived level of danger

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male perpetrator</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female perpetrator</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t-value</td>
<td>.727*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Level of danger is coded as 1 = not dangerous, 2 = mildly dangerous, 3 = moderately dangerous, 4 = dangerous, 5 = very dangerous.
*p < .05

Table 10.3
Mean scores of perceived level of danger by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male perpetrator</th>
<th>Female perpetrator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female respondent</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male respondent</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of responses</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1 = not dangerous, 2 = mildly dangerous, 3 = moderately dangerous, 4 = dangerous, 5 = very dangerous.

Table 10.4
Mean scores for perceived level of danger by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Male perpetrator</th>
<th>Female perpetrator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 25</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>4.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 and older</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1 = not dangerous, 2 = mildly dangerous, 3 = moderately dangerous, 4 = dangerous, 5 = very dangerous.
*p < .05

Table 10.5
Mean scores for suggested course of action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male perpetrator</th>
<th>Female perpetrator</th>
<th>T value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Call police</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>.410*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>.013**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>.010**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Each response is coded as 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree.
*p < .05  **p < .01
version, the younger age group reported a mean of 4.56 and the older age group had a mean of 4.78.

In selecting a suggested course of action following the violent episode, respondents were more likely to agree that the victim should "call police" when the perpetrator was a man than when the perpetrator was a woman. For the female violence episode, respondents reported a mean of 1.98. For the male version of events, the mean was 1.60. For this question, a response of 1 = "strongly agree," 2 = "agree," 3 = "disagree," and 4 = "strongly disagree." Respondents also were more likely to suggest "separation" and "divorce" following male-perpetrated violence.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As predicted, male violence was viewed as more dangerous than female-perpetrated violence. Part of this could be due to the fact men are generally bigger and stronger than women. The general belief is that men's size and strength make them more dangerous. Male-perpetrated domestic violence may also be seen as more dangerous because of the knowledge that there are fewer female domestic violence perpetrators than male perpetrators of such violence. However, violence and criminal activities are on the rise among girls and women. The increasing number of women arrested for violent crimes has given us insight into the higher likelihood that they can be violent against someone with whom they are close (i.e., a family member, spouse, or child). Indeed, findings that suggest women are more likely than men to use a weapon in an attack should be prompting us to devote much more scientific attention to this phenomenon.

Female respondents—regardless of the version they received—viewed the violence as more dangerous than did the male respondents. It is clear that even after decades of campaigns designed to educate men that violence is dangerous, more work remains. These campaigns teach that men should not be violent toward women no matter what the circumstance. However, it appears that they may not have educated people of the harm and damage that violence inflicts on victims, regardless of gender.

Respondents were much more likely to agree that the couple should get a divorce when the perpetrator was male than when the perpetrator was female. This finding may indicate that we are more likely to believe that a battered woman should have options. However, the caveat is that there is an age difference in this finding. When the abuser was female, traditional students (under 25 years of age) were more likely than non-traditional students to agree that the couple should divorce. This could be a result of campaigns against domestic violence. It may also reflect a trend toward more liberal views about divorce, which may result from domestic violence education occurring in schools and in the media. While older students may have been taught to tolerate spousal
abuse, younger students may have been raised in a time much less permissive of violence in general, especially of violence in intimate relationships. This uncovered difference in views by age difference should certainly be a topic for future research.

Finally, it should not be surprising that there are fewer services for abused men given the finding that a female perpetrator is perceived as less dangerous than her male counterpart. If we want to further address domestic violence, we must address differences in the way we view violence by men and women. Failing to do so will compromise all victims, men and women alike, in their efforts to escape the violence and to get the justice they deserve.

REFERENCES


