

Spouse Abuse

Dixon, Louise; Graham-Kevan, N

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Dixon, L & Graham-Kevan, N 2010, Spouse Abuse. in B Fisher & S Lab (eds), *Encyclopaedia of victimology and crime prevention*. vol. 1, SAGE Publications, pp. 6-10.

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

Dixon, L. & Graham-Kevan, N. (2010). Spouse abuse. In B.S. Fisher and S.P. Lab (Eds.).
Encyclopaedia of victimology and crime prevention (p.6-10). Thousand Oaks. Sage.

Abuse, Spouse

The term spouse abuse is commonly used to refer to aggressive, violent and/or controlling behaviours that take place between two people involved in an intimate relationship. Spouse abuse is a high frequency crime resulting in victims from all social classes, ethnicities, genders and educational backgrounds. Preventative methods at societal and community levels are required in addition to more traditional intervention approaches in order to adequately address this problem. This entry will provide an evidence based description of spouse abuse, considering its definition, terminology, prevalence, victims and perpetrators and issues related to the treatment and prevention of this problem.

Definitions

It is almost impossible to provide a single definition of spouse abuse that would be accepted by professionals from all theoretical perspectives. Many definitions have been developed for different settings (e.g., legal, medical, welfare, educational). Most definitions share some reference to physical, psychological and sexual damage to the victim, emphasising that abuse can take more than one form. Of importance, in addition to physical, sexual and psychological aggression or abuse, controlling behaviours are also considered in some definitions. Controlling behaviours are often subtle, for example they can refer to acts such as sulking, withholding affection, jealous and possessive behaviours and financial control. Some researchers have deemed this term preferable to psychological aggression to describe such behaviours because it emphasises the perpetrators motivation and not the impact these behaviours have upon the victim. Research has demonstrated the importance of incorporating such behaviours into research definitions. For instance, unlike physical aggression it has been demonstrated that controlling behaviours do not diminish over time. Longitudinal research also shows they may be a precursor to physical aggression, certainly

controlling behaviours and physical aggression have been found to co-occur within relationships. Furthermore, women have reported the affects of controlling behaviours to be more damaging than physical aggression.

Terminology

In addition to variations in definitions, the literature uses many terms to label this form of violence, some of which reflect the true nature of the problem better than others. The most widely used term to describe violence between intimate partners is *domestic violence*. However, this term lacks specificity as it can be used to describe all forms of violent and/or potentially abusive behaviour carried out within the family unit. Feminist scholars have been successful in largely defining the term *domestic violence*, resulting in it being virtually synonymous with male assault of female partners. Many researchers following this perspective have viewed and termed acts of male physical aggression as *battering* or *women abuse*. Such terms have been criticised for being unnecessarily narrow as they concern only behaviours towards female victims.

Terms including the word *spouse* have been also been deemed unhelpful in reflecting the true nature of this violence as it suggests this problem only occurs in marital relationships. In reality violence can occur in cohabiting and dating relationships in both heterosexual and same sex couples. Additionally, the use of adjectives such as *battering* have been deemed unhelpful as they connote severe chronic violence, which evidence from representative community samples suggests constitutes only a minority of all cases. Terms such as *abuse* imply that a behavioural act is both inherently unwelcome and morally unjustified. Although this may seem straightforward it is not. All behaviours occur within a relationship context and it is not possible to deduce motivations, consequences, legality or morality of actions without first exploring the contextual basis of them.

Finally, distinct terms have been suggested to coin the different severity of acts. Aggression can refer to acts which are less likely to result in injury (e.g., slapping) while violence can be used to highlight acts more likely to result in injury (e.g., choking and stabbing). However, the academic literature has largely adopted the term *partner violence* whereas the clinical literature continues to use the term *domestic violence*, therefore consensus between the two domains is currently lacking. For the purpose of consistency in terminology within this encyclopaedia the problem of violence within intimate relationships will be referred to as spouse abuse in this entry.

Prevalence and incidence

Prevalence and incidence rates of victims have notoriously differed for each gender. Researchers often vary in the definitions and terminology they use to classify spouse abuse in addition to the methodology they employ in surveys which determine rates. Resultantly it is difficult to compare rates across studies, countries and time. For example, when large scale community studies focus on the victimisation (and not perpetration) of individuals in relationships, rates of victimisation are disproportionately higher for women than for men. In comparison, large scale community studies that have asked men and women about their victimisation and perpetration of different acts during times of conflict in their relationship have revealed approximately equal rates.

Considering various large scale self report community studies, it seems likely that an estimate between 20 and 30 percent for the lifetime incidence of US women experiencing any violence from a partner is a sensible approximate. Countries where women hold less socio-political power than men have higher rates. The range reported for men's experiences of such violence in the US range widely due to differences in methodology. Agreed definitions, terms and consistency in methodological approach will allow researchers to produce comparable studies and resultant prevalence and incidence rates.

Theoretical perspectives and victims

While it is generally agreed to date that both men and women have the potential to be victims of spouse abuse, as outlined above the rates at which they are found to be victimised greatly differ. Determining the gender of victims of spouse abuse has historically been a contentious issue.

Different theoretical perspectives have been proposed to account for the aetiology of spouse abuse in comparison to the more traditional theoretical approaches of aggression and family violence. The feminist perspective has historically been very influential in understanding the aetiology of spouse abuse and putting violence against women on the political agenda in Western societies to date. The central feature of this theory is that men's aggression against women is used as a form of control stemming from patriarchal attitudes and therefore cessation of aggression and violence rests with changing or removing him. From this perspective women's aggression and violence is thought to be self defensive and therefore it is considered to be a male perpetrated crime. However its ability to fully contribute to an understanding of spouse abuse has been criticised as some researchers have suggested it is essentially an ideologically driven perspective and not one that is grounded in sound empirical evidence. Intervention programmes designed solely from this perspective do not traditionally address any psychological or emotional issues the offender or victim may have.

Typically researchers following the feminist perspective have investigated spouse abuse using selected samples, interviewing women in shelters or accident and emergency departments about their victimisation experiences and other associated issues. Such studies invariably find that women are overwhelmingly the victims of spouse abuse at the hands of their male partner. However, such research has often received criticism for not using standardised tools to measure the rates of different behavioural acts carried out by both members of a couple within large representative community samples.

Such criticisms have encouraged researchers to adopt and promote a gender inclusive approach to the understanding and study of spouse abuse, which considers the possibility that both genders can be perpetrators and/or victims of spouse abuse. Therefore research adopting this perspective is typically designed to take an objective and systematic approach to the study of spouse abuse. Research taking a gender inclusive approach has most frequently measured spouse abuse using a self report tool (or variants of it) named the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), which was developed by Murray Straus in the late 1970's. The development of the CTS opened the door to large scale data collection and quantitative analysis from which prevalence and incidence figures have been calculated in various countries to date. The CTS asks respondents to report on the use of a number of behaviours. The use of predetermined, clearly defined behavioural categories yields results that can be compared across people and samples. It has four subscales so that it can distinguish between rational tactics such as reasoning, verbally and symbolically aggressive acts such as shouting at the other and physical force such as pushing and kicking. Without this format many less severe acts of physical aggression, such as slap and push, would not be identified as aggressive. Some researchers do question the value of describing less severe acts of violence that may not be used out of a need to control their partner as spouse abuse. This is in comparison to other researchers, such as Murray Straus, who have repeatedly demonstrated the frequent and reciprocal use of such acts in addition to more severe acts between intimate partners and the negative consequences they produce for those involved and society at large.

The CTS was developed for use in the US National Family Violence Surveys conducted by Murray Straus and his colleagues in 1975 and 1985. These surveys found prevalence rates of approximately 12% of men and women experiencing partner violence within a 12 month period which was higher than previous estimates based on crime surveys. Controversially, these surveys also found symmetry in the use of physical aggression by men and women against their partners. Since then

many studies including large meta-analytic reviews have been published that measure men's and women's use of physical aggression in Western countries. This work demonstrates on average women experience higher rates of injury than men, yet they use violence in intimate relationships to the same extent as men. Furthermore, it has been shown that whilst men and women do use qualitatively different aggressive acts against their partner, they both engage in acts deemed to be severe and engage in threats with, or use of a knife or gun, at similar rates.

In summary, the type of theoretical perspective and methodology employed can greatly affect understanding of which gender experiences the most victimisation and the type of that victimisation. It is necessary to review the methodological quality of research studies from which conclusions have been reached. At present research adopting a gender-inclusive perspective using large scale representative community samples paints a picture of men and women aggressing against each other at approximately equal rates in Western societies. Such research does accept that patriarchy may play a more significant role in explaining spouse abuse in societies where violence against female partners is perceived as a right that men have.

When considering all research from different perspectives together the picture of spouse abuse is one which details various types that vary by the severity, frequency and controlling nature of violence used and experienced, in addition to its reciprocity. This finding had led some researchers to investigate and respond to all types of spouse abuse.

Perpetrators

A common and robust finding in the literature is that men who are violent to their female partner are a heterogeneous group. As a result many researchers have attempted to develop typologies of abusive men. The majority of research to date has examined male perpetrators of spouse abuse. Little work exists which investigates female perpetrators. However, longitudinal research

investigating the childhood correlates of spouse abuse in men and women suggests women share similar developmental risk profiles to men.

Amy Holtzworth-Munroe and her colleagues have pioneered work into typologies of male offenders in the last two decades. From a review of literature they constructed a hypothetical typology which discriminated between subtypes of abusive men living in the community. Three types of male perpetrator were classified using three descriptive dimensions of severity of violence, generality of violence and psychopathology/personality disorder of the perpetrator. They provide each type with a title that reflects the nature of their violence, namely Family Only (FO), Generally Violent/Antisocial (GVA) and Dysphoric/Borderline (DB) and each are proposed to account for 50%, 25% and 25% of abusive men residing in the community respectively.

The Family Only offender is hypothesised to most closely resemble non-violent comparison groups, having low levels of criminality, substance abuse and using violence infrequently, which is likely to be limited to family members and be of low severity. Their violence is assumed to occur from a combination of low level risk factors, such as poor communication skills with their partner, mild impulsivity and dependency on their partner. The GVA subtype is hypothesised to have low levels of psychological distress and depression, moderate levels of anger and a dismissive attachment style. They are thought to display the highest levels of impulsivity, antisocial personality, substance abuse and criminality, committing moderate to severe levels of violence both within and outside of the family unit. The DB sub-type is hypothesised to be the most psychologically distressed and emotionally volatile, evidencing characteristics of borderline personality and high levels of dependency on and preoccupation with intimate partners, reacting with anger when they feel rejected, abandoned or slighted. They are also most likely to display high levels of depression and anger and low-moderate levels of criminality and substance abuse. Violent acts are hypothesised to be of moderate-high severity and limited mainly to family members. Empirical tests of this

typology by the authors and other researchers have proved fruitful, demonstrating the existence of each of the three types in addition to a fourth type which falls in between the GVA and FO groups on several measures.

The potential for classification systems of perpetrators to play an integral role in the development of treatment programmes remains a debated point. Some researchers have suggested a one type-fits-all approach is appropriate for all sub-groups of perpetrators whilst others have shown the efficacy of programmes increase when intervention type is matched to offender type.

In addition to typologies of male perpetrators some researchers have focused on classifying the couple involved in the violent relationship. Michael Johnson has been influential in this work. He classified men and women in couples based on each member's use of controlling behaviours and aggression. Couples are labelled as participating in 'Common Couple Violence' (later renamed Situational Couple Violence) when one or both members used non-controlling physical aggression toward the other. Perpetrators are labelled 'Intimate Terrorists' if they use aggression and violence toward their partner in a bid to control them. In this couple one partner will use either no aggression or non controlling aggression and is referred to as a 'Violent Resistant' partner. Couples are labelled 'Mutual Violence Control' when both aggress against one another in a bid for control. Other researchers are now examining the dyadic nature of spouse abuse by examining the product of different interacting attachment styles. It is evident from such work that the classification of one person in the couple as victim or perpetrator only is not straightforward.

Such dyadic approaches highlight the importance of understanding what both members of the couple contribute to the abuse without placing blame on a victim. This typological approach to understanding spouse abuse synthesises a vast array of research and literature into a conceptually manageable account for professionals working with victims, perpetrators or couples engaging

spouse abuse. Furthermore, it enables professionals to understand the wider picture of spouse abuse reducing any preconceptions about the types of people and behaviours that experience this problem and encourages evidence based work.

Spouse abuse within the context of the family

Research has provided empirical support for the co-occurrence of spouse abuse and child maltreatment within the literature with estimates varying widely depending on the nature of the sample investigated. Furthermore, as demonstrated in the spouse abuse literature, aggression by men and women in the same family is particularly common. If the safety and custody of a child is of issue, it is necessary to carry out family assessments to establish all types of violence that are taking place within that unit and which parent is at risk of harming their child(ren) in addition to establishing who has a positive relationship with the child. The research shows that assessments should be guided by evidence based research rather than based on stereotypical expectations of who is likely to be violent. Furthermore, examining spouse abuse within the context of the family as a whole is important if cycles of aversive family interactions are to cease. Etiological, intervention and prevention models will be improved by considering all forms of possible maltreatment in the family together rather than in isolation

Summary

The growing awareness of spouse abuse over the last few decades has led to a number of approaches to prevention, assessment and treatment. The controversy evident in the spouse abuse literature highlights the importance of understanding the evidence base in order to gain a true picture of the nature of spouse abuse and its related problems. With the aforementioned points considered it is important that any message relayed to the public in an attempt to prevent or intervene with spouse abuse is evidence based and applies to all genders, ages, social groups and ethnicities within the target population.

Louise Dixon

Nicola Graham-Kevan

Further Readings

- Archer, J. (2000). Sex differences in aggression between heterosexual partners: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126, 651-580.
- Dixon, L., & Browne, K.D. (2003). Heterogeneity of spouse abuse: A review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 8, 107-130.
- Dutton, D.G. (2007). *Rethinking domestic violence*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Hamel, J. & Nichols, T.L. (Eds.). (2007). *Family interventions in domestic violence: A handbook of gender-inclusive theory and treatment*. New York: Springer
- Holtzworth-Munroe, A. & Stuart, G.L. (1994). Typologies of male batterers: Three subtypes and the differences among them. *Psychological Bulletin*, 116, 476-497.
- Johnson, M.P. & Ferraro, K.J. (2000). Research on domestic violence in the 1990's: Making distinctions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 948-963.
- Straus, M. & Gelles, R. (1990). *Physical violence in American families*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction publishers
- Straus, M., Hamby, S.L., Boney - McCoy, S. & Sugarman, D.B. (1996). The revised conflict tactic scales (CTS2): Development and preliminary psychometric data. *Journal of Family Issues*, 17, 283-316.

See also Battered women syndrome; Cycle of violence, theory of; Dating violence; Domestic violence; Domestic violence, same sex; Intimate partner violence, theories of; Women's use of aggression