

Journal of Interpersonal Violence

<http://jiv.sagepub.com/>

The Role of Gender in Officially Reported Intimate Partner Abuse

Heather C. Melton and Carrie Lefevre Sillito

J Interpers Violence published online 26 December 2011

DOI: 10.1177/0886260511424498

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jiv.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/11/15/0886260511424498>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

[American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children](#)

Additional services and information for *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://jiv.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://jiv.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Dec 26, 2011

[What is This?](#)

The Role of Gender in Officially Reported Intimate Partner Abuse

Journal of Interpersonal Violence

XX(X) 1–22

© The Author(s) 2011

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0886260511424498

<http://jiv.sagepub.com>



Heather C. Melton¹ and Carrie Lefevé Sillito¹

Abstract

The role of gender in intimate partner abuse (IPA) perpetration and victimization has been debated for the last several decades. Two perspectives have emerged regarding this debate. Researchers from the family violence perspective argue that men and women are violent at near equal rates and call for a reframing of the issue from one of woman battering to one of family violence. In contrast, feminist researchers maintain that men make up the majority of perpetrators and women the majority of victims in cases of intimate partner abuse. While some have put forth arguments explaining these differences, this debate is far from over. Using official reported cases of IPA, this study examines 815 IPA cases of which 13% were female perpetrated in an attempt to clarify gender differences and similarities among male and female offenders beyond prevalence rates. Special attention is paid to contextual differences and similarities and implications this research has for future research and policy.

Keywords

intimate partner abuse, police reports, content analysis

Researchers have been debating the role of gender in intimate partner abuse (IPA) for several decades. Two perspectives have emerged using very

¹University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

Corresponding Author:

Heather C. Melton, Department of Sociology, University of Utah, 380 S 1530 E #301, Salt Lake City, UT 84112

Email: Heather.melton@soc.utah.edu

different methods and arriving at, not surprisingly, very different research results. According to the family violence perspective, men and women are violent at near equal rates in the home (Dutton, 2006; Gelles, 1972; Gelles, Flannery, Vazsonyi, & Waldman, 2007; Straus, 1992; Straus & Hotaling, 1980). According to the feminist perspective, men make up the majority of the perpetrators, and women the majority of the victims in violent intimate partner relationships (Anderson, 2005; Belknap & Melton, 2005; Bersani et al., 1988; Brownridge, 2009; Kilmartin & Allison, 2007; Melton & Belknap, 2003; Osthoff, 2002; Price, 2005; Walker, 1979; Yllo, 1984; Yllo & Bograd, 1988). Until research is able to reconcile the opposing findings and policy makers have a clear understanding of gender in violent relationships, victims may be overlooked and resources may be misallocated. Understanding the gender debate is essential to assure that victims receive services, agencies receive funding, and perpetrators have accountability within the social and criminal justice systems. The purpose of this article is to add to the debate regarding gender using the lesser used data source of police reported intimate partner abuse.

Family Violence Versus Feminist Perspective

National survey research reporting that men and women are equally likely to use violence (“gender symmetry”) in relationships fueled the gender debate in IPA research and has become known as the family violence perspective. Gelles and Straus were the first to find that in large national samples, men and women report using violence in relationships at near equal rates (Gelles, 1972; Straus, 1980). The majority of studies finding gender symmetry use the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) or the CTS2. Family violence research asserts that “gender symmetry” findings in social surveys research means that gender is not the primary factor in family violence and that women are equally as violent as men in the home (Dutton, 2006; Farrell, 2008; Gelles, 1972; Gelles et al., 2007; Kimmel, 2002). For example, one family violence research study indicates that men and women report aggression at similar rates (48% of females and 61% of males (Bookwala, Frieze, Smith, & Ryan, 1992). Fiebert’s assessment of more than 300 scholarly investigations, empirical studies, and review articles (primarily of family violence research), indicated that women are as aggressive, or more so, than men (Fiebert, 2004).

In contrast, feminist researchers focus on meanings and outcomes instead of rates of noncontextualized violence. Feminist researchers are more likely to use qualitative data, samples of victims from police agencies or shelters, and frame their questions as to reveal sexual violence and violence from past

relationships in addition to current physical violence (Belknap & Melton, 2005; Davies, Ford-Gilboe, & Hammerton, 2009; Evans, 2005; Johnson, 2005, 2006b; Kilmartin & Allison, 2007; Melton, 1999; Melton, 2000; Melton & Belknap, 2003; Miller, 2005). Feminist findings consistently confirm that a large majority of victims are women, while the large majority of perpetrators are men (Belknap & Melton, 2005; Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Johnson, 2008; Melton & Belknap, 2003; Stark, 2007; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Women are an overwhelming majority of victims seeking services through agencies. In addition to physical and emotional costs of IPA, the monetary costs of violence inflicted by men on women are at least twice the costs of violence inflicted by women on men (Arias & Corso, 2005; Rivara et al., 2007).

Table 1 shows conflicting findings by feminist and family violence scholars. Work by feminist scholars exhibits higher rates of victimization, injury, and death for female victims of IPA. Work by family violence scholars indicates similar rates of violence by gender. It is notable that several areas of interest are not specifically addressed by family violence research. This is because of the omission of measures of stalking, homicide, homicide-suicide, or economic costs of abuse from the conflict tactics scale often used in family violence data.

As is evidenced by Table 1, the findings of family violence and feminist research are often conflicting. This may be primarily due to methodological differences between the two camps. Researchers following the feminist perspective argue that the methodology used in family violence research (the CTS), which leads to an appearance of gender-neutral battering, is lacking several key elements. The CTS asks questions about violence in the home under the framework of a disagreement, conflict, or argument. It then asks if the respondent, or their partner, has ever carried out specific violent behaviors. The CTS framework of questioning violence in the context of an argument references minor couple disagreements, but does not account for violence that may be the result of power differentials, or a control motive. It does not ask about the context of the violence, motives, power, control, injury, self-defense, or sexual violence. As was pointed out in Table 1, family violence research often excludes measures of homicide, homicide-suicide, stalking, and economic costs of abuse. In addition, the CTS only asks about a current relationship and violence within the past 12 months in that relationship.

In contrast, feminist scholars conclude that men are more likely to have motives of power and control while women are more likely to have motives of self-protection (Johnson, 1995; Saunders, 2002). Furthermore, women are more likely to be injured (Belknap & Melton, 2005; Brush, 1990; Dobash &

Table 1. Research of IPA and Gender

Type of Abuse	Feminist Research Findings	Family Violence Research Findings ^a
Sexual and physical assault	Approximately 4.8 million intimate partner rapes and physical assaults are perpetrated against U.S. women annually, and approximately 2.9 million intimate partner physical assaults are committed against U.S. men annually (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).	76.9% of female (130) and 67.4% of male (91) high school students reported experiencing unwanted sexual activities. Similar numbers of males and females reported on most types of nonconsensual sexual activities. The exception is that more girls reported being "felt up" ($p < .001$). In addition, 17.5% of girls and 13.3% of boys reported experiencing physical violence (Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000).
Stalking	Almost 5% of surveyed women and 0.6% of surveyed men reported being stalked by a current or former spouse, cohabiting partner, or date at some time in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).	—
Relationship type	Women more in danger from previous relationships. 73% of victims of IPA in emergency room settings identified as single, separated, or divorced. Married women were less likely to report abuse than any group except widows (Stark, 2007).	Study of 336 undergraduate students showed that physical violence among dating relationships was not gender specific (Thompson, 1991).
Homicide	About one third of female murder victims were killed by an intimate (compared to 3% of male murder victims). The proportion of females killed by an intimate has increased. The proportion of males killed by an intimate has decreased (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 2006).	—
Injury	Women were more likely than men to report that they were injured in the course of disagreements with their partners. This result held even for those cases in which both men and women were violent (Brush, 1990).	Meta-analytic review. Women and men experience similar rates of injuries. Women do experience slightly higher rates of injuries than men (62% of injuries were toward women) (Archer, 2000).

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Type of Abuse	Feminist Research Findings	Family Violence Research Findings ^a
Intimate partner homicide–suicide	97% of perpetrators of homicide–suicide were male. Only 3% of perpetrators were female. 97% of victims were female. Only 3% of victims were male (Sillito & Salari, 2006).	—
Physical assaults	Only 5% of intimate partner assaults are estimated to be female perpetrated (Belknap & Melton, 2005).	Used Conflict Tactics Scale. Findings indicate that 18% of men and 13% of women reported being victims of physical violence at some point in a heterosexual relationship (Carrado, George, Loxam, Jones, & Templar, 1996).
Mental and physical health (economic costs of abuse)	Total average cost with at least 1 physical IPA incident was US\$387 for men and US\$948 women (Arias & Corso, 2005).	—

a. No family violence studies were located that specifically addressed stalking, homicide, homicide–suicide, or economic costs of abuse. This is likely due to the high usage of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) among family violence research. The CTS does not measure for stalking, homicide, homicide–suicide, or economic costs of abuse.

Dobash, 1998; 1995). and women are overwhelmingly victims of sexual violence (Price, 2005; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Women are also at a much higher risk of violent victimization after a relationship has ended (Davies et al., 2009; Stark, 2007). By only measuring incidence of violence in current relationships, CTS results show a symmetry-skewed and incomplete picture of IPA. Even though the CTS2 was developed to address some of the shortcomings of the CTS, it is still lacking in a measure for motivation and meanings of violence.

Gender and Typologies of Intimate Partner Abuse

Johnson (1995, 2000) helps to explain differences in findings of family violence researchers and feminist researchers by creating a typology of intimate partner abuse. Several other researchers (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Stark, 2007) have also recognized different types of abuse, and different motives of

perpetrators. However, because Johnson's typology seems to be widely recognized and used, Johnson's typology will be a reference point for this article. Johnson's typology includes situational couple violence (both partners use violence to solve disputes or disagreements), intimate terrorism (one partner uses a general pattern of coercive control to obtain and maintain power over their partner), mutually combative control (both parties use violence for power in the relationship—rare), and violent resistance (one partner is an intimate terrorist and the other partner uses violence to attempt to escape from the violence imposed by the controlling partner; Johnson, 2008). Within these typologies, Johnson explains that not all violence is equal; family violence theorists find symmetrical gender violence because their research examines situational couple violence (SCV), while feminist researchers study the more dangerous and deadly type of violence (called "intimate terrorism"), and thus find gender asymmetry in violence.

Feminist theorists often use research that allows for consideration of context, and therefore differentiate between types of abusive relationships. Other research has also indicated a need to distinguish among types of violence because situational couple violence and intimate terrorism are different in terms frequency of attacks and injuries (Johnson & Leone, 2005), gendered use of violence (Johnson, 2006a, 2008; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000), and of help seeking (Leone, Johnson, & Cohan, 2007). Moreover, researchers have discovered that there are gendered differences in reporting violence (Kimmel, 2002), and in using self-defense or fighting back (Dekerseredy, Saunders, Schwartz, & Alvi, 1997; Johnson, 2005). Specifically, men tend to underreport their own use of violence (Campbell, 1995; Dobash & Dobash, 1998), while women are more likely to use violence in self-defense (Belknap & Melton, 2003; Dekerseredy et al., 1997). Because the CTS cannot differentiate among meanings or motives behind violent acts, the "gender symmetry" measurement is seen by some feminist authors to be "virtually meaningless in the face of dramatic differences in the nature and consequences of men's and women's situational couple violence" (Johnson, 2006b, p. 60).

Feminists recognize that apparent gender symmetry in situational couple violence does not mean that the experience is equal for men and women (Anderson, 2005). Instead, men and women have been socialized to view, and experience, violence differently. Men may be taught to be violent, while women may be taught to be passive and submissive. Violence, in many ways, is an accepted part of masculinity. Women, however, are taught not to be violent and may experience greater shame associated with their violence (Stark, 2007). This means that in large national data sets, men and women may report violence differently. Women are more likely to underreport

victimization and overreport perpetration, while the opposite is true for men (Anderson, 1997; Melton & Belknap, 2003; Smith, 1994). Male perpetrators are likely to use blaming, minimizing, and denying when discussing their violence (Johnson, 2008; Pence, 1993). They may believe that their violence was justified. Batterers often erroneously see themselves as victims. In one case of murder–suicide, the perpetrator recorded such feelings in his diary before killing his ex-wife. He was upset because she fled to a domestic violence shelter and reported his violence to police. He wrote, “I would like to kill [victim’s name] for all she has done to me and the miserable future she is going to put me through” (Hosmer, 2003, p. 16). This quote signifies that, perpetrators who feel “victimized” may not report their own violent acts in survey research because they feel justified in committing the violence.

Policing Intimate Partner Abuse

While typologies of intimate partner abuse, levels of fear, victimization, and perpetration are relatively easy to sort out on paper, distinguishing between them in real life situations is not always as clear. Examining individual violent acts will not give a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of power and control in the couple; one must examine the violence contextually. Couples who engage in situational couple violence and couples characterized by an intimate terrorist (or intimate terrorist and violent resistance) often meet police intervention. However, it may not always be easy for police officers to know if the couple experiences situational couple violence or intimate terrorism.

Researchers have discovered that there is vast potential and worth in examining data from police intervention with violent couples. After all, police intervention can mean life or death, and captivity or freedom from abuse for many victims. The way in which officers respond to a scene can determine if a victim will seek help through legal recourse or be further isolated in violence. Repeated inadequate police intervention can normalize the violence for the victim and give the perpetrator more power by sending the message that his or her actions are admissible by law (Belknap & Melton, 2005; Fleury-Steiner, Bybee, Sullivan, Belknap, & Melton, 2006; Houry, Reddy, & Parramore, 2006; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). Mandatory arrests, while sending the message that violence is serious, may not be the best solution in every case (Melton, 1999). In violent resistance couples, or in situational couple violence, the victim may be arrested along with the perpetrator, which could prevent him or her from seeking police intervention in the future (Houry et al., 2006). The police have the enormous task of identifying perpetrators and victims at the scene.

While police data is typically seen as part of the feminist repertoire (Melton & Belknap, 2003) and many family violence researchers have conceded that differences are most likely to be apparent using this data (Straus, 1999), it is in many ways ideally suited for comparisons between male and female offenders. Some may expect these male and female offenders should be more alike. These should be the cases that overall are more serious and thus more likely to come to the attention of criminal justice personnel regardless of whether the offender or victim is female or male. Moreover, studying gender differences and similarities in this population is particularly important because regardless of where one stands on this issue, many of the policy implications for both sides affect this population. For example, many family violence researchers have reached the conclusion that IPA needs be treated as a “family issue” or a “communication issue” and have advocated for treatment that involves both parties. One example of such treatment is couples counseling for IPA. Some communities are recommending this intervention for IPA after violence comes to the attention of the police. Policies, such as this, suggesting gender symmetrical solutions for IPA carry the risk of being widely implicated. This could include cases of couples experiencing severe violence with police involvement.

The issue of couples counseling is just one example of the many possible policy implications of the gender debate. The conflict and debate between feminist and family violence can be summarized by their opposing stands on whether or not gender is the central contributing factor to IPA. If the problem is nongendered violence, then nongendered solutions (such as couples counseling) could be proper intervention techniques. On the other hand, if gender is at the heart of IPA, then nongendered solutions magnify the problem, place undue blame on the victim, and shift blame from the perpetrator to the “couple.” This article, explores gender differences and similarities of IPA offenders and victims who come into contact with the police in an attempt add to the critical debate over the role of gender in IPA perpetration and victimization. The research question, then, addresses the role of gender in these cases of IPA perpetration and hypothesizes that there will be gender differences beyond simple prevalence of perpetration of IPA. The goal is to add to the debate using oft overlooked official data and adding more contextual data.

Method

The data used in this article were a combination of quantitative and qualitative data from a police department in a large, western metropolitan area. Included are all police-classified domestic relationship incidents reported to the police in 2003. Only cases where the gender of the offender and the victim could be determined were included. Moreover, only cases where the offender

and the victim were involved in a current or former heterosexual intimate partner relationship were included (thus child–parent, parent–child, sibling, roommate, and same-sex relationships were excluded). Only cases where the offender and victim were over 18 were included.¹ Finally, in an attempt to compare those offenders who should be most similar, only male and female offenders who were only identified by the police as offenders (as opposed to those identified as both offenders and victims) were used.² Thus, the final study sample was composed of 815 domestic disturbance cases.³

As stated above, both quantitative and qualitative data was used. This includes data entered by the police into check boxes at the time of the report as well as the qualitative narrative reported by the police at the scene. This narrative was combined with the already supplied quantitative data and recoded by trained researchers into the data set.⁴ The researchers read the narrative and determined the victim–offender relationship, the types of behaviors in the incident, whether or not children were present or witnesses were present, and so on. Variables recoded in this manner and used in this analysis include victim–offender relationships, threats, evidence of verbal abuse, evidence of prior violence (i.e., if any prior incidents were mentioned by the parties involved or the police at this incident), alcohol or drugs present, victim scared for safety, offender present when police arrived, conflicting statements by victim and offender (i.e., if each party said the other was the offender and they were the victim), presence and type of violence (using a modified conflict tactics scale—Straus, 1979), stalking (using the Stalking Behavior Checklist; Coleman, 1997), whether or not there were injuries, and police action. In addition, if the police recorded an actual threat, this was included in the data verbatim. Variables included in the quantitative data provided by the police include gender and age of the offender and victim. Additional recidivism data was used for the analysis. These data included the names and roles of any person whom the police responded to in additional domestic violence incidents from 2003 to 2006.⁵

Comparisons between male and female offenders used cross-tabulations. Additional analysis was performed on the qualitative data involving threats using standard content analysis.

Findings

Table 2 presents the general comparison between male and female offenders. There were a total of 712 offenders and 103 female offenders in this population of incidents of intimate partner abuse reported to the police. Thus males compose 87% of the offenders, with females accounting for 13%. Regarding comparisons, male offenders showed more evidence of

Table 2. Comparing Incidents Involving Male Versus Female Offenders

	Male Offenders with Female Victims N = 712 (%)	Female Offenders with Male Victims N = 103 (%)	Chi-Square Tests
Witness present	314 (44.1)	37 (35.9)	2.455
Threats made	185 (26.0)	19 (18.4)	2.724
Verbal abuse	390 (54.8)	53 (51.5)	0.400
Evidence of prior violence	320 (44.9)	27 (26.2)	12.912***
Alcohol/drugs present	132 (18.5)	18 (17.5)	0.068
Victim scared for safety	256 (36)	9 (8.7)	30.378***
Offender present when police arrived	154 (21.6)	34 (33.0)	6.567**
Conflicting statements	104 (14.6)	27 (26.2)	8.986**
Violence at incident	344 (48.3)	59 (57.3)	2.894
Stalking at incident	287 (40.3)	31 (30.1)	3.944*
Injuries	190 (26.7%)	32 (31.1%)	0.872
Police action (0 = nothing; 1 = arrest/cite)	104 (14.7)	18 (17.8)	0.677

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

prior violence ($\chi^2 = 12.912$; $p < .001$), the victims of male offenders were more likely to be scared for their safety ($\chi^2 = 30.378$; $p < .001$), and male offenders were more likely than female offenders to engage in stalking behaviors ($\chi^2 = 3.944$; $p < .05$). Police reports noted that female offenders were more likely to be present when the police arrived ($\chi^2 = 6.567$; $p < .01$) and have conflicting statements at the time of police contact ($\chi^2 = 8.986$; $p < .01$). There were no significant differences in terms of witnesses present, threats made, verbal abuse recorded, alcohol or drugs present, violence at the incident, injuries, or police action taken.

While no significant gender differences were found in whether or not there was violence at the reported incidents, another way to look at this issue is to

assess types of violence used. Results for this question are presented in Table 3. Additionally, comparisons for female and male offenders were conducted for specific stalking behaviors. In terms of different types of violence used, male offenders were significantly more likely to grab their victims ($\chi^2 = 4.737$), while female offenders were more likely than male offenders to hit with an object ($\chi^2 = 9.939$; $p < .01$), try to hit with an object ($\chi^2 = 3.923$; $p < .05$), and stab their male victims ($\chi^2 = 13.782$; $p < .001$). There were no significant gender differences in whether a perpetrator tore, pushed or shoved, slapped, pulled hair, bit, hit with a fist, kicked, threw something, twisted arm or leg, drove recklessly, choked victim, tied up, beat up, raped, threatened with a knife, or threatened with a gun. In terms of stalking, female offenders were more likely than males to steal or read mail ($\chi^2 = 6.921$; $p < .01$), while male offenders were more likely than females to engage in "other" stalking behaviors ($\chi^2 = 4.832$; $p < .05$).⁶ Although male offenders were more likely to have stalked a victim, there were no significant differences between male and female offenders who broke into home or car, came unwanted, threatened or harmed a new partner, made unwanted calls, left unwanted messages, sent unwanted emails, sent unwanted gifts, checked up on, and followed or watched.

Recognizing that relationships characterized by IPA often involve various patterns of IPA perpetration, and in an attempt to further contextualize these offenders that came to the attention of the police in this time period, gender differences in recidivism data was also explored. A total of 173 (21%) of the 815 offenders appeared in at least one additional incident in the police records from 2003 to 2006. Of these, 26 were female offenders from the original incident and 147 were male offenders. There were no significant differences in terms of numbers (25% of females and 21% of males respectively). However, whereas female and male offenders were both equally likely to appear in the recidivism data, females were significantly more likely to appear in the future cases as victims (66% of the female offenders later appeared as victims vs. 12% of male offenders) and males were significantly more likely to appear in the future cases as offenders (88% of male offenders later appeared as offenders vs. 33% of female offenders; $\chi^2 = 32.94$; $p < .001$).

Interesting findings emerge regarding the qualitative data on threats made. When comparing threats quantitatively, there were no significant differences between males and females in terms of prevalence of threats made. However, when compared qualitatively (i.e., examining the qualitative narrative of the police reports) important differences were detected.⁷ Males were more likely than female offenders to make a specific threat to kill that included name-calling and expletives. Similarly, more male offenders mentioned specific threats to hurt their victim than female offenders (23% compared to 16%). When

Table 3. Comparing Specific Violence/Stalking Involving Male Versus Female Offenders

	Male Offenders With Female Victims N = 712 (%)	Female Offenders With Male Victims N = 103 (%)	Chi-Square Tests
Violence			
Tore	14 (2.0)	2 (1.9)	0.001
Push/shoved	135 (19.0)	13 (12.6)	2.469
Grabbed	95 (13.4)	6 (5.8)	4.737*
Slapped	47 (6.6)	10 (9.8)	1.376
Pulled hair	27 (3.8)	3 (2.9)	0.201
Bite	11 (1.5)	2 (1.9)	0.089
Hit with fist	99 (14)	14 (13.7)	0.004
Kicked	19 (2.7)	5 (4.9)	1.475
Throw something	36 (5.1)	5 (4.9)	0.009
Hit with an object	19 (2.7)	9 (8.7)	9.939**
Try to hit with object	9 (1.3)	4 (3.9)	3.923*
Twist arm or leg	7 (1.0)	0 (0.0)	1.024
Drive recklessly	8 (1.1)	1 (1.0)	0.017
Choked	33 (4.6)	1 (1.0)	3.028
Tied up	3 (0.4)	1 (1.0)	0.552
Beat up	24 (3.4)	2 (1.9)	0.589
Raped	2 (0.3)	0 (0.0)	0.290
Threatened with a knife	8 (1.1)	0 (0.0)	1.172
Threatened with a gun	2 (0.3)	0 (0.0)	0.291
Stabbed ^a	0 (0.0)	2 (1.9)	13.782***
Stalking			
Broke home/car	25 (3.5)	1 (1.0)	1.880
Stole or read mail	0 (0.0)	1 (1.0)	6.921**
Came unwanted	113 (15.9)	12 (11.7)	1.246

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

	Male Offenders With Female Victims N = 712 (%)	Female Offenders With Male Victims N = 103 (%)	Chi-Square Tests
Threatened/ harmed new partner	15 (2.1)	2 (1.9)	0.012
Made unwanted calls	138 (19.4)	19 (18.6)	0.035
Left unwanted messages	46 (6.5)	7 (6.8)	0.017
Sent unwanted emails	11 (1.5)	0 (0.0)	1.613
Sent unwanted gifts	6 (0.8)	0 (0.0)	0.874
Checked up on	13 (1.8)	0 (0.0)	1.911
Followed or watched	38 (5.3)	2 (1.9)	2.230
Other stalking behavior	123 (17.3)	9 (8.7)	4.832*

a. Burned and shot are not included because none of the incidents involved these behaviors.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

females did make threats to kill, a few were similar to male threats to kill. But, overall the female offenders made fewer threats to kill, and their threats were much less graphic and included fewer expletives than male threats.

Finally, an interesting finding is qualitative gender differences in the use of children in the threats. Females were much more likely to cite protection of children as a basis for a threat.⁸ For example, females often said they would do something to the male if the male did something to harm the child or children. This type of threat was nonexistent among males who threatened (16% of female threats compared to 0% of the male threats). Children may be an important impetus for female offenders to use or threaten violence in a way that is not true for males. This, once again, represents a potential

qualitative difference in violence between male and female offenders. This may represent an important difference in terms of motivation for violence use. This further illustrates the need to explore this issue both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Discussion

This article explores the role of gender in officially reported intimate partner abuse. At a very basic level, it is important to note that male offenders continue to make up the majority of the offenders that police deal with. In this case, males accounted for 87% of the offenders, while females were 13% of the overall offenders. This is at par with other studies using police data (Melton & Belknap, 2003). While some researchers have conceded that gender differences in IPA are more apparent in this population of IPA offenders (Straus, 1999), this is still important because the implications of the family violence argument will impact this population. For example, as stated previously, various couple counseling programs for IPA are used with this population of IPA offenders. While the couples are often screened and some programs are “voluntary,” couples counseling might not be the most appropriate response with this population of IPA perpetrators and victims. This is especially true in situations of intimate terrorism, violence resistance, or a combination of the two (Timmons, Bryant, Platt, Netko, & Hecker, 2009). Moreover, cases, such as those in this data, that have come in contact with police or court systems often experience more severe violence than do other couples. Several researchers noted that couples counseling is not appropriate for cases of severe violence (Bouchard & Lee, 1999; Golden & Frank, 1994; Gondolf, Hansen, & Haraway, 1993; Timmons et al., 2009). This recommendation by past research, combined with the gender asymmetries among offenders in this data, is a strong indication that couples counseling may not be an appropriate default intervention for this population. Treating female offenders who come in contact with police intervention may be tricky as well, especially if females are both victims and offenders in violent relationships. Would it be appropriate for female offenders to be placed in batterer treatment if they truly are “violence resisters?” The female offenders in this population appear to be qualitatively different from the male offenders, which has important implications for how offenders should be treated in the criminal justice system. The qualitative and quantitative data presented here suggest that at very least, if males and females are both court-ordered to attend battering treatment programs, they should be gender separated to address the specific needs of each gendered group.

Once again, it should be pointed out the importance of studying this population of IPA with police-notified cases of abuse. These male and female offenders are those that are expected to be the most alike (i.e., the most serious offenders are more likely to come to the attention of the police for both male and female offenders), and yet some important gender differences emerge beyond the prevalence of male versus female offenders. First, there is significant evidence that context is important when comparing male and female offenders. For example, male offenders were significantly more likely to have evidence of prior violence than female offenders. This illustrates the import of examining the overall relationship rather than the specific incident. The fact that males are more likely than females to have a history of violence may be an indication that in the relationship, overall, males are more likely to be the primary offenders, whereas females may be more likely to be the primary victims even though in this specific incident they may have used violence. This may be missed and misinterpreted if just specific incidents are examined and once again, illustrating the complexity of relationships involving IPA.

Similarly, as noted in the findings, male offenders were also more likely to reappear in future cases as offenders, whereas female offenders were more likely to reappear as victims in future cases. This provides further evidence that those female offenders who come to the attention of the police may be more likely to be the true victims in the relationship and that the overall context of the relationship needs to be taken into account. Police must be trained to understand the complexities involved in these types of relationships and be able to deal with the incidents appropriately.

In addition, female victims of male offenders were significantly more likely to report being scared than male victims of female offenders. This supports prior research (Melton & Belknap, 2003; Morse, 1995) and also indicates that the violence being perpetrated may be qualitatively different. If a female victim is scared and a male victim is not, that may indicate different motivations for the violence and certainly indicates different meanings for the violence. This could be evidence that females are using violence in self-defense, or at the very least male victims interpret female's use of violence differently than female victims do. Whereas the violence used by males and females is qualitatively different, interventions (including couples counseling) that assumes both genders use the same violence, or that both are equally responsible for the violence, may place excess blame on a primary victim who is attempting to resist violence, fight back, or protect herself.

Two other findings also provide some interesting insight into the violence perpetrated by male and female offenders. It is important to note that female

offenders were much more likely to be present than male offenders as well as have conflicting statements. First, while there are a multitude of reasons why female offenders may be more likely to be present when the police respond and this certainly needs to be further explored, one conclusion could be that they did not perceive themselves to be guilty of anything and thus had no reason to flee the scene before police arrived. Whereas men, if they perceived themselves as guilty, may be more likely to leave after the incident, before the police arrived. This finding may indicate that these women, at the very least, perceived themselves to be acting out of self-defense.

While it is important to note that for most of the violence variables male and female offenders were quite similar, some additional differences emerge when exploring the specific types of violence used by male and female offenders. Thus, in some ways these offenders are similar: they use similar methods to perpetuate their violence. The major difference emerges when objects or weapons are used—female offenders were significantly more likely to hit with an object, try to hit with an object, and stab their male victims. This could be evidence that women are simply more likely to use weapons against male victims than male offenders are against female victims and thus perhaps just as seriously violent as male offenders. However, it could, once again, indicate that women are either responding defensively (i.e., picking up the closest object and using it) or attempting to equalize the power differential that is typically (obviously not always) apparent between men and women. Further research is needed on this finding before any conclusions should be made.

Finally, the analysis of the qualitative data on threats illustrates some important methodological considerations that must be incorporated in future research. Looking at gender in IPA, males and females may appear similar when using “check boxes” and quantitative measures. However, gender differences emerge when looking at qualitative data. This data will be an important resource to utilize in an effort to end the debate regarding gender in IPA perpetration and victimization.

In terms of how these findings fit into the family violence versus feminist debate regarding IPA, there are both similarities (more in line with the family violence perspective) and differences (more in line with the feminist perspective). This is important. Using police-reported IPA supplies validity to both arguments. However, regarding Johnson’s typology of IPA offenders, while some may truly be “intimate terrorists” and primary aggressors in their relationships, many of the female offenders may be more likely to fit into the “violent resistance” category. The findings that male victims of female perpetrators were not scared, that female offenders were more likely to be involved in

future cases as victims, and that female offenders did not leave the scene when the police arrived may be just some of the evidence of this. These findings show evidence that female offenders in police-involved cases, that one would expect to be more alike to male offenders, may be in fact very different. Thus, adding these contextual details supports the feminist perspective regarding the import of gender and IPA offending.

Numerous limitations of this data must be addressed. The major limitation is that data is dependent not only on what gets reported to the police (i.e., much domestic violence is never reported) but also on how it gets reported by the responding officer. For example, some reports are much more detailed than others. This does not necessarily mean that certain behaviors did not occur in the incident. It may just mean that certain police officers did not ask about them. One example would be drug or alcohol use present at the scene. The data are dependent on officer's making note of this. This may only happen if it is obvious or if one of the parties interviewed mentions it but that does not necessarily mean that it was not present. However, if it was not mentioned, it was coded as not being present. Different officers, based on a variety of characteristics (gender, race, preconceived ideas about IPA, etc . . .), may record and investigate domestic disturbances differently. Moreover, the data are dependent on how they were classified by responding officers. In other words, the data depend on how the officer report "offender," "victim," or other classifications. No doubt there is inherent bias in using police records for research. However, it is an oft overlooked resource for exploring the issues introduced in this article. Thus, in spite of these limitations, police data continue to be an important data source; they are a good source for understanding cases that come to the attention of the police, how police view and report cases, and the actions that police take in dealing with domestic disputes. These findings should be viewed as a direction to explore these issues in the future and clues rather than as definitive answers regarding the important questions of gender and IPA.

In conclusion, using officially reported IPA data, some important gender similarities were noted. However, there were some important gender differences. Furthermore, it is of utmost importance we continue to study this population of IPA offenders and victims given many of the proposed changes in the IPA literature (including couples counseling or other nongendered interventions proposed primarily by family violence researchers) will directly affect these offenders and victims. Future research exploring gender in IPA is important to assure that victims receive the services they need, agencies continue to receive funding, and the true offenders in IPA situations are held accountable.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. IRB (No. 12110) approval was granted to study those above 18.
2. While the import of studying mutual violence is recognized, for this study the purpose is to try and compare offenders. Finding similarities or differences in this population will lead to more definitive findings regarding gender in IPA offending and victimization.
3. The incidents included all cases reported to the police. Thus some involved actual violence, whereas others involved yelling and other behaviors that caused someone to contact the police.
4. Over the course of the study, 10 researchers/coders were involved in the coding of the qualitative data. Each coder received extensive training and a detailed codebook, including a modified CTS and SBC scales. Moreover, the coders met weekly to discuss cases and issues and were in constant contact via email. The first author closely supervised and checked the coders work to ensure intercoder reliability.
5. In the majority of cases, the offender only appeared in one other case as either a victim or an offender OR in multiple cases, but as only a victim or an offender. In the few cases where an offender appeared multiple times in the recidivism data in multiple roles, the role they appeared the most often was used.
6. This included behaviors that could not be easily categorized in the SBC such as having others engage in the stalking for them (i.e. proxy stalking) and damaging property.
7. Once again, limitations should be mentioned—this qualitative analysis was only done where threats were recorded by the responding officer. Thus other threats could have been made but not recorded by the officer.
8. In most cases, it was unclear if and how this was related to actual child abuse perpetrated by the male.

References

- Anderson, K. L. (1997). Gender, status, and domestic violence: An integration of feminist and family violence approaches. *Journal of Marriage & Family, 59*, 655-669.
- Anderson, K. L. (2005). Theorizing gender in intimate partner violence research. *Sex Roles, 52*, 853-865.

- Archer, J. (2000). Sex differences in aggression between heterosexual partners: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *126*, 651-680.
- Arias, I., & Corso, P. (2005). Average cost per person victimized by an intimate partner of the opposite gender: A comparison of men and women. *Violence and Victims*, *20*, 379-391.
- Belknap, J., & Melton, H. (2005). *Are heterosexual men also victims of intimate partner abuse*. Harrisburg, PA: VAWnet, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence/Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- Bersani, C. A., Chen, H.-T., Van Hasselt, V. B., Morrison, R. L., Bellack, A. S., & Hersen, M. (1988). Sociological perspectives in family violence. In V. B. Van Hasselt, R. L. Morrison, A. S. Bellack, & M. Hersen (Eds.), *Handbook of family violence* (pp. 57-86). New York, NY: Plenum Press.
- Bookwala, J., Frieze, I. H., Smith, C., & Ryan, K. (1992). Predictors of dating violence: A multivariate analysis. *Violence and Victims*, *7*, 297-311.
- Bouchard, G. P., & Lee, C. M. (1999). La violence contre l'épouse: Les traitements de couple sont-ils appropriés? [Violence against the spouse: Are couple treatment appropriate?] *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*, *40*, 328-342.
- Brownridge, D. A. (2009). *Violence against women: Vulnerable populations* (1st ed.). New York, NY: Routeledge.
- Brush, L. D. (1990). Violent acts and injurious outcomes in married couples: Methodological issues in the national survey of families and households. *Gender and Society*, *4*(1), 56-67.
- Campbell, J. C. (1995). *Assessing dangerousness: Violence by sexual offenders, batterers, and child abusers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Carrado, M., George, M. J., Loxam, E., Jones L., & Templar, D. (1996). Aggression in British heterosexual relationships: A descriptive analysis. *Aggressive Behavior*, *22*, 401-415.
- Coleman, F. L. (1997). Stalking behavior and the cycle of domestic violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *12*, 420-432.
- Davies, L., Ford-Gilboe, M., & Hammerton, J. (2009). Gender inequality and patterns of abuse post leaving. *Journal of Family Violence*, *24*(1), 27-39.
- Dekerseredy, W. S., Saunders, D. G., Schwartz, M. D., & Alvi, S. (1997). The meanings and motives for women's use of violence in Canadian college dating relationships: Results from a national survey *Sociological Spectrum*, *17*, 199-222.
- Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. P. (1998). *Rethinking violence against women*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Dutton, D. G. (2006). *Rethinking domestic violence*. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada: UBC Press.
- Evans, S. (2005). Beyond gender: Class, poverty and domestic violence. *Australian Social Work*, *58*(1), 36-43.

- Farrell, W. (2008). Part 1: Domestic violence: Who is doing the battering and what's the solution. In W. Farrell & J. Sterba (Eds.), *Does feminism discriminate against men? A debate* (pp. 33-38). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Fiebert, M. S. (2004). References examining assaults by women on their spouses or male partners: An annotated bibliography. *Sexuality & Culture: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 8, 140-177.
- Fleury-Steiner, R. E., Bybee, D., Sullivan, C. M., Belknap, J., & Melton, H. C. (2006). Contextual factors impacting battered women's intentions to reuse the criminal legal system. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 34, 327-342.
- Gelles, R. J. (1972). *The violent home: A study of physical aggression between husbands and wives*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE.
- Gelles, R. J., Flannery, D. J., Vazsonyi, A. T., & Waldman, I. D. (2007). Family violence. In D. J. Flannery, A. T. Vazsonyi, & I. D. Waldman (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of violent behavior and aggression* (pp. 403-417). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Golden, G. K., & Frank, P. B. (1994). When 50-50 isn't fair: The case against couple counseling in domestic abuse. *Social Work*, 39, 636-637.
- Gondolf, E. W., Hansen, M., & Harway, M. I. (1993). Treating the batterer. In M. Hansen & M. Harway (Eds.), *Battering and family therapy: A feminist perspective* (pp. 105-118). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Hosmer, C. A. (2003). *Conversations with Jean*. Lincoln, NE: Authors Choice Press.
- Houry, D., Reddy, S., & Parramore, C. (2006). Characteristics of victims coarrested for intimate partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 21, 1483-1492.
- Jackson, S. M., Cram, F., & Seymour, F. W. (2000). Violence and sexual coercion in high school students' dating relationships. *Journal of Family Violence*, 15(1), 23-36.
- Jacobson, N., & Gottman, J. (1998). *When men batter women*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Johnson, M. P. (1995). Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: Two forms of violence against women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 283-294.
- Johnson, M. P. (2005). Domestic violence: It's not about gender, Or is it? *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 67, 1126-1130.
- Johnson, M. P. (2006a). Apples and oranges in child custody disputes: Intimate terrorism vs. situational couple violence. *Journal of Child Custody*, 2(4), 43-52.
- Johnson, M. P. (2006b). Conflict and control: Gender symmetry and asymmetry in domestic violence. *Violence Against Women*, 12, 1003-1018. doi:10.1177/1077801206293328
- Johnson, M. P. (2008). *A typology of domestic violence: Intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England.

- Johnson, M. P., & Ferraro, K. J. (2000). Research on domestic violence in the 1990s: Making distinctions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 948-963.
- Johnson, M. P., & Leone, J. M. (2005). The differential effects of intimate terrorism and situational couple violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey. *Journal of Family Issues*, 26, 322-349.
- Kilmartin, C., & Allison, J. (2007). *Men's violence against women: Theory, research, and activism*. Mahwah, NJ: Pittsburg State University.
- Kimmel, M. S. (2002). "Gender Symmetry" in domestic violence: A substantive and methodological research review. *Violence Against Women*, 8, 1332-1363. doi:10.1177/107780102237407
- Leone, J. M., Johnson, M. P., & Cohan, C. L. (2007). Victim help seeking: Differences between intimate terrorism and situational couple violence. *Family Relations*, 56, 427-439.
- Melton, H. (1999). Police response to domestic violence. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 29(1-2), 1-21.
- Melton, H. C. (2000). Stalking: A review of the literature and direction for the future. *Criminal Justice Review*, 25, 246-262.
- Melton, H. C., & Belknap, J. (2003). He hits, she hits: Assessing gender differences and similarities in officially reported intimate partner violence. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 30, 328-348.
- Miller, S. L. (2005). *Victims as offenders*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Morse, B. J. (1995). Beyond the Conflict Tactics Scale: Assessing gender differences in partner violence. *Violence and Victims*, 10, 251-272.
- Osthoff, S. (2002). But, Gertrude, I beg to differ, a hit is not a hit is not a hit: When battered women are arrested for assaulting their partners. *Violence Against Women*, 8, 1521-1544. doi:10.1177/107780102237968
- Pence, E., & Paymar, M. (1993). *Education groups for men who batter: The Duluth model*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Price, L. S. (2005). *Feminist frameworks: Building Theory on violence against women*. Black Point, Nova Scotia, Canada: Fernwood.
- Rivara, F. P., Anderson, M. L., Fishman, P., Bonomi, A. E., Reid, R. J., Carrell, D., & Thompson, R. S. (2007). Health care utilization and costs for women with a history of intimate partner violence. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 32(2), 89-96.
- Sillito, C. L., & Salari, S. M. (2006, September 17). *Murder-suicide: Couple characteristics, child outcomes, and community impact 1999-2004*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Violence, Abuse, and Trauma, San Diego, CA.
- Smith, M. D. (1994). Enhancing the quality of survey data on violence against women: A feminist approach. *Gender and Society*, 8(1), 109-127.

- Sokoloff, N. J., & Dupont, I. (2005). Domestic violence at the intersections of race, class, and gender. *Violence Against Women, 11*(1), 38-64.
- Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive control*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Straus, M. A. (1979). Measuring intrafamily conflict and violence: The Conflict Tactics (CT) Scales. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 41*(1), 75-88.
- Straus, M. A. (1980). Victims and aggressors in marital violence. *American Behavioral Scientist, 23*, 681-704.
- Straus, M. A. (1999). The controversy over domestic violence by women. In X. B. Arriaga & S. Oskamp (Eds.), *Violence in intimate relationships* (pp. 17-44). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Thompson, E. H., Jr. (1991). The maleness of violence in dating relationships: An appraisal of stereotypes. *Sex Roles, 24*, 261-278.
- Timmons, S., Bryant, J., Platt, R. A., Netko, D., & Hecker, L. (2009). Ethical and clinical issues with intimate partner violence. In L. Hecker (Ed.), *Ethics and professional issues in couple and family therapy* (pp. 107-129). New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2000). *Extent, nature, and consequences of intimate partner violence*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Justice.
- U.S. Dept. of Justice. (2006). *Homicide trends in the United States*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/intimates.htm>
- Walker, L. E. A. (1979). *The battered woman*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Yllo, K. (1984). The status of women, marital equality, and violence against wives: A contextual analysis. *Journal of Family Issues, 5*, 307-320.
- Yllo, K., & Bograd, M. (1988). *Feminist perspectives on wife abuse*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Bios

Heather C. Melton is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Utah. Her work focuses on violence against women and the criminal justice response to it. Recent published works include articles on stalking in the context of intimate partner abuse, gender in IPA perpetration and victimization, and the impact of rape myths on victims of sexual assault.

Carrie Lefevre Sillito received her PhD in sociology at the University of Utah in May of 2011. Research interests include gender, health, and intimate partner abuse. Previous research includes an analysis of intimate partner homicide-suicide in the United States. She has field experience in intimate partner abuse through her work as a caseworker and victim's advocate program director working with violence victims.