

Researchers Agree Women May Hit Their Male Partners - But Infrequently 'Batter' Them - Pattern of Coercion Is Seldom Present in Female Aggression

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Are men and women mutually abusive in intimate partner relationships? This question is fueling passionate controversy within the domestic violence community. The debate has primarily revolved around surveys conducted by Murray Straus, Richard Gelles and Susan Steinmetz (1979, 1980, 1990) using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS).

The results of this research indicated that men and women initiate aggressive acts (slapping, pushing, kicking, punching, etc.) with about equal frequency.

In the arena of domestic warfare, proponents of gender equivalence use these and similar studies measuring acts of aggression not only to justify an increased need for services for abused men, but also to create a quasi "level playing field" of violence between the sexes.

First of all, does an act of aggression define a relationship as abusive? According to Murray Straus, "The number of assaults by itself ignores the context, meaning and consequences of those assaults." (Straus, 1991, p.11). Context is a crucial issue. The CTS asks only about aggression that occurs within the context of an argument. Domestic violence can occur without an apparent conflict.

There is a lack of information regarding the motivation for the aggressive behavior (self-defense, control, frustration, intent to injure) and a lack of information about the outcomes (fear, end of argument, escape, injuries, nothing significant). There are also flaws in self-report data. These were the telephone interviews. Would you tell a stranger on the phone that you had physically or verbally attacked a loved one?

There is evidence of gender mutuality regarding acts of aggression, but not in regard to patterns of violence. It is interesting to note that other national surveys (NCDVS, NSFH and the NVAW) do not find that males and females are mutually aggressive (see Bachman and Saltzman, 1995; Tjaden and Thoennes, 1998; and Zlotnick, et.al., 1998). Dr. Straus comments, "The fact that women produce less injury than men is a critical difference."

Perhaps we should examine what we are talking about. Bob Geffner and Alan Rosenbaum did a good job of differentiating between aggression and abuse in their new book.

"Aggression is an action, abuse is a dynamic. Partners may be mutually aggressive, and the evidence suggests that they are, but they are rarely mutually abusive.

"Women may hit their male partners, but infrequently batter them, because battering or abuse includes a pattern of coercion, intimidation and control, which is less frequently present in female-to-male aggression." (*Domestic Violence Offenders*, Geffner and Rosenbaum, 2001, p. 2.) Johnston (1995) postulated a continuum of spouse assault anchored on the "low end" by common couple aggression and on the high end by patriarchal terrorism.

Common couple aggression may include relatively infrequent, non-injurious behavior that can occur in many intimate relationships. It may or may not be mutual, does not victimize the partners and does not create a mood of fear, oppression and control.

Patriarchal terrorism includes a pattern of physically and/or psychologically abusive behaviors, including threats, assaults, isolation, humiliation, etc. This violent behavior is controlling and produces fear as well as injury to the body and spirit. The term "patriarchal" can be dropped when referring to female perpetrators or to gay and lesbian relationships.

It is important to keep in mind that people on both sides of the debate believe that there are abusive and violent women. They also believe that there are battered men.

No one (to my knowledge) in the domestic violence movement would support battering behavior by either gender. Beliefs about the extent of women's violence differ. The resulting arguments can resemble a battering relationship between experts.

We need to question our rhetoric, allow for respectfully dissenting opinions and provide services for ALL VICTIMS. I know that shelters provide hotel vouchers, counseling, hotline and referral services for men, and that there are shelters (very few) for battered men.

Having said that, I will end by quoting Ola Barnett and myself: "There is no research that can say that the cost of women's violence — emotionally, physically, or in regard to property damage — in any way matches the violence perpetrated by men.

"The body of evidence suggests that there should be no argument. Diffusing energy in an ongoing gender war takes away from the critical task of developing effective prevention and intervention strategies." (*It Could Happen to Anyone*, LaViolette and Barnett, 2000, p. 109)