Reflections on Partner Violence: 20 Years of Research and Beyond
Deborah L. Rhatigan, Todd M. Moore and Amy E. Street
J Interpers Violence 2005; 20: 82
DOI: 10.1177/0886260504268599

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jiv.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/20/1/82
Reflections on Partner Violence
20 Years of Research and Beyond

DEBORAH L. RHATIGAN
VA Boston Healthcare System

TODD M. MOORE
Brown University

AMY E. STREET
VA Boston Healthcare System

The authors reflect on past research and technology as well as their hopes for future innovations within the field of intimate partner violence. They review work that has contributed to current conceptual definitions of partner violence, particularly those that have shaped the field’s broadened perspective. They discuss technological and measurement innovations that have contributed to more accurate assessments of violence prevalence. The authors believe that via these technologies, the true extent of violence within the home has been made known. In conclusion, the authors argue that to reduce violence between partners, there is an overwhelming need for future researchers to build on past data, develop improved theories, and apply those ideas to prevention and intervention techniques and programs. Furthermore, they believe that it is imperative for current and future programs to be extensively evaluated and tested for their effectiveness.

Keywords: partner violence; prevalence; measurement; intervention

In honor of the 20th anniversary of the Journal of Interpersonal Violence, we have been asked for our opinions on important contributions and future innovations within the field of interpersonal violence. This is not a simple task. There have been a number of significant advances in the field over the past 20 years, yet there is much that needs to be learned. Thus, selecting the most important advancements proved to be challenging. This article describes our reflections on these questions as they apply to research on intimate partner violence. We chose to limit our opinions to this specific issue because it is one in which we are most familiar.

If importance is gauged by how far advances in the field have moved us along the path toward the eventual goal of eliminating intimate partner vio-
lence, we believe the most important advance is improvement in the conceptual definitions of intimate partner violence. Our improved understanding has allowed the field to move toward an appreciation of prevalence that is richer, and presumably more accurate, than the initial prevalence rates identified more than 20 years ago. Because of these advances, the field as a whole has a clearer understanding of the scope and the nature of the problem. Specifically, 20 years ago, Murray Straus and Richard Gelles shared findings from the first National Family Violence Survey, which had been conducted in 1975, and prepared for the second National Family Violence Survey, set to begin in 1985. One of the primary objectives of these surveys was to demonstrate that acts of violence among family members were much more frequent than previously understood. Both surveys were successful in this goal, providing the only systematic assessment of intimate partner violence at the time.

Since that time, awareness of the scope of the problem of intimate partner violence has dramatically increased. Intimate partner violence is now acknowledged as a significant problem not just among married couples but also among cohabitating, dating, and gay and lesbian couples (e.g., Renzetti & Miley, 1996; Riggs & O’Leary, 1996). Perhaps even more dramatically, our understanding of the types of behaviors included in a definition of partner aggression has expanded beyond physical abuse. A majority of professionals now acknowledge the importance of studying psychological and sexual abuse among intimate partners (e.g., Arias & Pape, 2001; Bennice, Resick, Mechanic, & Astin, 2003) and have a greater appreciation for the costs of all of these forms of violence to the victim, the perpetrator, and society as a whole.

Perhaps the greatest advancement in the conceptual understanding of violence, however, comes from an emerging awareness that “a hit is not a hit is not a hit.” That is, increasingly, researchers and practitioners are aware that simple counts of violent behavioral acts may not be sufficient to capture necessary details about a particular couple’s (or individual’s) use of violence. Instead, a growing appreciation for the importance of a range of stimulus and response elements, including the function of the violence and its impact, has allowed the field to identify important differences in types of violent couples or perpetrators. One of the most influential theoretical and empirical contributions on typology has been Johnson’s (1995) work distinguishing “common couple violence” from “intimate patriarchal terrorism.” Johnson asserts that the majority of violent couples identified from general community samples represent the common couple violence typology, that is, couples in which husbands and/or wives engage in occasional outbursts of violence in the midst of conflict. In contrast, many couples identified through the advo-
cacy or justice systems represent examples of patriarchal terrorism, or systematic male violence for the purposes of control. Although additional testing is necessary to confirm these and other proposed typologies, work in this area has allowed the field to make logical sense of apparent contradictions in research data, including prevalence rates. Moreover, this awareness of differences among types of violent couples has been a critical step in establishing treatment programs that can be individualized to increase treatment effectiveness for all forms of violence.

Advances in conceptual definitions of intimate partner violence have undoubtedly influenced innovations in the field, and we believe that the development and refinement of tools for assessing partner violence and its associated factors are among the most important methodological contributions. For instance, self-report instruments have been the mainstay, and these measures have increased at an enormous rate in the past 20 years. Researchers can now administer reliable and valid measures that quickly and efficiently gather a plethora of information related to violence, including attitudes and beliefs about violence, motives for violence, frequency of perpetration and victimization across a wide variety of violent behaviors, and typologies of intimate partner violence. Our improved understanding of violence has also led to revisions of well-cited measures in the field (e.g., Conflict Tactics Scale–Revised; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) as well as the development of measures that expand beyond standard measures of physical abuse to assess dominance and other control tactics (e.g., Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory; Tolman, 1989).

Observational methods of assessment, an important advancement, hold great promise in the field of intimate partner violence. A number of coding systems have been created that provide valuable information about the events and circumstances surrounding violent behavior. For example, the Marital Interaction Coding System (Weiss, 1975) and Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF) (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) have been used in the field to examine couples’ expressions of anger, defensiveness, and general negative communication styles. These observational coding systems have provided initial evidence regarding the manner in which violence unfolds within the context and dynamics of intimate partner relationships.

Recent methodological innovations in measurement have allowed the assessment of the temporal or day-to-day relationship between violence and variables thought to be associated with partner violence. Through using calendar-assisted, semistructured interviews and diary methods to monitor daily events, researchers have been able to examine the degree to which the particular events precede partner violence, such as the odds of violence on days of alcohol use compared to days of abstinence (e.g., Fals-Stewart,
This methodology has evolved such that researchers can now use ecological momentary assessments of violence in naturalistic settings. For example, researchers can now use personal digital assistants (i.e., palm-top computers) that allow for prompting of participants to provide information in a simple, brief, and efficient format multiple times per day. Researchers are also able to assess within-person fluctuations (e.g., mood states) over days or hours in predicting the likelihood of violence, the impact of contextual factors (e.g., social setting) that precede violence, and the direct effects of substance use on the occurrence of violence.

It is also true that significant methodological advances in psychophysiology and neuroimaging have provided researchers with the opportunity to better understand the neurobiological underpinnings of violence. Results from numerous electroencephalographic, positron emission tomography, and magnetic resonance imaging studies suggest that violent behavior may be linked to disturbances in the frontotemporal neural systems (see Hoptman, 2003; Mills & Raine, 1994, for reviews). Although much work in this area remains, including what brain structures and functions may protect against partner violence and how to use neurobiological findings to inform treatment, improvements in methodology have increased our understanding of neurobiological correlates of partner violence. Taken together, development and refinement of self-report instruments, validated assessment tools of behavioral interactions, technological innovations, and advances in neuroimaging have all contributed to improved understanding of the physiological, situational, and behavioral factors associated with partner violence.

As a consequence of significant developments in partner violence definitions and measurement, numerous prevention and intervention techniques, strategies, and programs have been developed, but unfortunately, their benefits and possible drawbacks (i.e., risk to victim) remain unclear (Jasinski & Williams, 1998; Mears, 2003; Wathen & MacMillan, 2003). If the field hopes to substantially reduce prevalence rates of relationship aggression, researchers must turn their attention to the development of efficacious interventions. Therefore, we argue that it is especially important for researchers to systematically evaluate and refine violence prevention and intervention techniques over the next 10 years.

Much attention has been drawn to the issue of violence prevention or the idea that it might be important to address problems before they start (see Schew, 2002, for a review of violence prevention programs). This best describes the intent behind primary prevention programs. Primary prevention targets large populations of individuals (e.g., middle or high school students) who may or may not have engaged in prior violent behavior. These programs attempt to educate participants by providing information about vio-
lence prevalence, refuting myths and stereotypes, and challenging attitudes that support violence (e.g., see Avery-Leaf & Cascardi, 2002, for a review of dating violence prevention programs), or they may attempt to provide skills, such as communication and conflict resolution strategies, in an effort to promote nonviolence (see Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001, for a discussion of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program). In contrast, secondary prevention programs concentrate on individuals deemed at risk for interpersonal violence. For example, psychologically aggressive couples may be targeted due to evidence suggestive of their potential risk for future physical violence against one another (Hamby, Straus, & Sugarman, 1996). Secondary prevention programs strive to create highly relevant interventions, focusing on skills and education as it pertains to the participants being treated. At this point, little is known about the efficacy of one prevention type over the other, largely due to limited outcome data available. However, it has been suggested that programs targeting skills, such as communication, show somewhat greater promise (Jasinski & Williams, 1998).

Beyond prevention programs, future researchers must also continue to evaluate current interventions and develop new, improved intervention programs. Current standards in practice often refer or mandate violent men to batterer programs designed to promote accountability and reduce conflict. In contrast, women involved in violent relationships are often referred to shelter housing and support programs designed to increase their safety and facilitate empowerment. Yet current evidence suggests that education, retraining, and advocacy interventions, although conceptually and theoretically driven, may not be powerful enough to evoke substantive change (e.g., Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004; Wathen & MacMillan, 2003).

To improve on current violence reduction programs, we believe that it is imperative for researchers to better understand the factors or processes more proximal to violent acts (e.g., substance use, anger, information processing, etc.). We also think that researchers must expand the scope of basic and applied studies to include victim and perpetrator perspectives rather than the more typical practice of studying one to the exclusion of the other. To accomplish this, researchers must develop more comprehensive theoretical paradigms, preferably ones that integrate ideas from a multitude of academic disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, law, etc.). In support of this notion, current evidence suggests that coordinated community action models, or those that integrate legal, social work, and mental health services, may be especially effective (Jasinski & Williams, 1998).

In summary, we believe that the past 20 years have brought us significant improvements in conceptual definitions of partner violence, which largely resulted from advances in assessment tools and techniques. As we turn our
attention to the next 10 years, we must use what we have learned to inform our interventions. We must continue to develop our theoretical ideas, integrating what we know with other academic perspectives. Most important, however, future researchers must systematically evaluate both prevention and intervention outcomes with methodologically sophisticated studies using valid and reliable measurement (see Schewe, 2002, for details on problems associated with prevention measurement). We must learn more about our interventions, determine mechanisms of action, and facilitate improvements. We believe that it may be important to tailor our interventions, keeping in mind typologies (i.e., common couple vs. patriarchal terrorism), gender issues (male-perpetrated vs. female-perpetrated violence), and cultural diversity. In conclusion, we sincerely hope that over the next 10 years, we will be able to say much more about effective strategies and techniques to reduce partner violence based on solid theoretical and empirical evidence.

REFERENCES


Deborah L. Bhatigan, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral research fellow within the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder at the VA Boston Healthcare System. She studies relationship issues within the context of partner violence, most especially women’s decisions to remain involved in or terminate violent relationships. She is also interested in the role of posttraumatic stress disorder in affecting victimized women’s outcomes.

Todd M. Moore, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Brown University Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies. His research interests include evaluating the relationship between illicit substance use and marital violence as well as examining the moderating role of gender stereotypes (i.e., masculinity) on those associations.

Amy E. Street, Ph.D., is a clinical research psychologist in the National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder at the VA Boston Healthcare System and an assistant professor of psychiatry at the Boston University School of Medicine. She has an active program of research investigating negative mental and physical health outcomes associated with interpersonal trauma.