

Gender Differences in Domestic Violence Initiation

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Abstract

Historically men have been thought of as the aggressors in domestic violence. Men and women are both capable of initiating domestic violence, but typically each takes a different approach. While in most areas of study gender is not a relevant classification for differentiation, in domestic violence both genders have discreet approaches and different motivations and objectives.

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Intimate partner violence has traditionally been considered a “male” problem, inflicted on females (Johnson and Ferraro, 2000). Despite the cultural expectation of males as the aggressors in domestic violence, both genders can initiate violence and domestic violence can occur in same-sex relationships as well. The majority of research regarding domestic violence or intimate partner violence (IPV) focuses on male-initiated violence and research for any other variant of IPV is limited. Intimate partner violence occurs in nearly 28% of couples during the course of their relationship (Umberson, 1998).

The traditional view of domestic violence is caused by the patriarchal model, which places women as being subordinate to men (Johnson and Ferraro, 2000). It is important to recognize that men are far less likely to report instances of domestic violence than their female counterparts when considering information about domestic violence (Tsui and Leung, 2010). Men who are abused or raped are less likely to report their victimization or to seek counseling for the emotional repercussions because of fears related to social acceptance and what is expected by them as a condition of masculinity (Monk-Turner, 2010). While men are likely to under-report the fear of attack and to not report serious occurrences, women are sometimes oversensitive to an incursion, due to media and social influences, and are likely to over-report as a result (Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005).

Information relating to whether men actually initiate most domestic violence occurrences is highly debated. Most research in the area contains much bias. Some

research even suggests that in relationships women are more likely to instigate a domestic violence event, however, due to the fact that men are more likely to cause injury due to physical size and physical strength, their partners are more likely to attribute the beginning and escalation of violence to the male partner. The differences in the research is likely able to be attributed to self-reporting bias (Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005).

Male domestic violence initiation can be attributed to the socialization of males and the formation of a masculine gender role in those males. In a large number of societies, men are expected or have a perceived expectation of being aggressive and being in control. Men feel that when their control and dominance in a relationship is threatened, thereby threatening their masculinity, that the appropriate cultural retaliation for such a threat is violence (Anderson, 1997). In some instances men will react to forces external their intimate relationship, such as difficulties in their work, by being hypersensitive to violations of their perceived control in their intimate relationship, resulting in a violent incursion with the intimate partner as an attempt to regain some control (Umberson, 1998). It has also been proposed that some men will initiate domestic violence because they do not feel that it is wrong for them to control “their” women in such a manner, and that it is their privilege as men to be able to utilize violence (Felson, 2005). Male initiated intimate partner violence is more likely to cause severe injury and death than similar aggressions initiated by females (Fowler, 2011).

Females that initiate domestic violence are likely to do so as a result of feeling oppressed and unable to achieve their goals due to obstacles created by their partner. (Anderson, 1997). Another potential cause of domestic violence initiation in females is a desire for control, in essence a reversing of the typical gender roles (Monk-Turner, 2010).

Felson (2005) has proposed that women who initiate domestic violence do so as a response to previous acts of violence, or other acts that attempt to control them. Domestic violence initiation by females is suspected to be lower for numerous reasons, including the fact that men and women express anger and hostility very differently. Women are more likely to utilize non-injurious methods of anger expression, and thus limiting their actual domestic violence initiation. However, women who do engage in violent behavior typically do so very evenly and without regard to the gender or relationship with their victim. Men, on the other hand, typically are more likely to strike another male than a female, and more likely to strike a female stranger than an intimate partner (Cross, 2011).

In same-sex relationships, the rate of reporting for intimate partner violence tends to be about the same as for heterosexual women. When considering only intimate partner violence reported by women who have had an intimate relationship with another female, the rate was nearly twice as high as for women who had only ever engaged in heterosexual relationships. When isolating cases of same-sex intimate partner violence the rate of reporting is lower than that of strictly heterosexual women, but higher than that of strictly heterosexual men (Sorenson, 2009). In same-sex relationships there are additional forms of abuse available in addition to physical violence as a result of homophobic attitudes in society. In homosexual relationships the abuser has the ability to threaten exposing their partner's sexual orientation to individuals outside the relationship, as well as restricting their access to other members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) community. It is also these cultural views that make access to counseling and proper legal protections difficult; for example, in 11 states it is not possible to secure a restraining order for a same-sex partner (Peterman, 2003).

Recent research which attempts to compensate for the lack of male-reporting of domestic violence as well as the bias of self-reporting points to the initiation of domestic violence being basically even across both genders and in same-sex relationships (Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005). The most common reason that either gender initiates a domestic violence event is for the purpose of gaining control over their partner or the relationship. Domestic violence has been expanded over the years to include not only instances of physical violence, but also traits called “domestic terrorism”, where one partner uses financial coercion, physical aggression, intimidation and threats to control the relationship (Peterman, 2003). In terms of injury that can be inflicted in a physical domestic violence confrontation, men do have the upper hand of physical strength, but recently women have been becoming better prepared to handle such threats by taking self-defense classes and generally being able to portray a more independent image, consistent with ideals of feminism, breaking away from the confines of being dependent on men (Seelau, 2005).

In some relationships there are acts of control and violence that are consensual, and are an expected part of the relationship for the partners involved. These behaviors are typically categorized under the label sadomasochist behavior. It is disputed whether or not these behaviors constitute domestic violence (Peterman, 2003). The primary difference between domestic violence and sadomasochist activity is the outcome for the “victim”. While many individuals find it difficult to cope with domestic violence and as a result have difficulty with maintaining a normal functional life when there is a concern of a violent event, individuals involved in sadomasochist behaviors are believed to have

normal functional lives, with sexual sadomasochism functioning only as a minor and even innocuous component of the relationship (Lawrence, 2008).

While cultural stereotypes and a count of reported domestic violence cases lead to the belief that men attack women far more often than women attack men in intimate relationships, there is no evidence to support this proposition. In fact, there does appear to be gender symmetry in domestic violence initiation, even though there are some differences in the way that each gender initiates violence and the reaction of the other gender.

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