



## Coercive control in intimate partner violence<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The construct of coercive control has been central to many conceptualizations of intimate partner violence (IPV), yet there is widespread inconsistency in the literature regarding how this construct is defined and measured. This article provides a comprehensive literature review on coercive control in regards to conceptualizations, definitions, operationalization, and measurement; and attempts to provide a synthesis and recommendations for future research. A summary and critique of measures used to assess coercive control in IPV is provided. At least three facets of coercive control are identified: 1) intentionality or goal orientation in the abuser (versus motivation), 2) a negative perception of the controlling behavior by the victim, and 3) the ability of the abuser to obtain control through the deployment of a credible threat. Measurement challenges and opportunities posed by such a multifaceted definition are discussed.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a worldwide epidemic that causes negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of victims, families, and communities (Bonomi et al., 2006; Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKewon, 2000; Cooper & Smith, 2011; Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006; Sheridan & Nash, 2007; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). At the heart of understanding IPV to date is the construct variously referred to as power and control, domination and control, or coercive control. Scholars and advocates in the field have consistently described IPV as both an expression of—and an attempt to maintain—power and control over intimate partners (e.g., Shepard & Pence, 1999). Early formulations conceptualized power and control within a feminist, sociopolitical framework, and examined how structural societal forces created environments of oppression that facilitate violence against women, both in relational and cultural contexts (e.g., Adams, 1988; Schechter, 1982). For many years, the concept of control as it relates to violence against women has guided research, policy and practice. For example, the most commonly used model for treatment of abusive men, the so-called Duluth model (Pence & Paymar, 1993), has as its centerpiece the Power and Control Wheel. In fact, so pervasive is the notion of power and control that, with the proliferation of batterer treatment standards across the U.S., many states adopted as part of their standards the requirement to include information on power and control in approved or certified batterer treatment programming

(Austin & Dankwort, 1999).

However, the evolution of controversy over the role of gender in IPV (e.g., Hamby, 2015; Kimmel, 2002; Straus, 1999) has raised questions about the degree to which power and control should be understood as a relational enactment of larger social structures of gender inequality and oppression. Some scholars argue that because rates of self-reported IPV perpetration appear to be symmetrical (i.e. men and women report acts of IPV at similar rates), power and control issues need to be separated from gender (Felson & Outlaw, 2007). Other scholars argue, in contrast, that while men's and women's use of violence may be symmetrical, motivations for use of violence, including control, differ by gender (Dobash & Dobash, 2004).

Early research reviewed by Hamberger (2005) supports the thesis that motivations for use of IPV vary by gender. A more recent, systematic review of men's and women's use and experience of IPV in clinical samples, however, suggests there is less clarity about the relationship of gender and IPV motivations (Hamberger & Larsen, 2015). Hamberger and Larsen (2015) suggest that the lack of clarity about the relationship between control and gender highlights an important gap in the literature regarding how the construct of control in IPV is defined and studied. Although the concept of control as a key dynamic that maintains IPV has been generally accepted within the field, there is actually very little research or consensus on the concept of coercive

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control. Analyses of coercive control have been primarily theoretical, reflecting a sociopolitical perspective (Stark, 2006, 2007), or empirical, focusing on objective behavioral indicators or self-reported motivations (Hamberger & Lohr, 1985; Myers, 1995). Questions about gender symmetry also underscore the need to understand the context of coercive control in IPV. Without understanding of overall context of violence in relationships, including the pattern of control and violence (as opposed to a single behavior viewed in isolation), it is very difficult, if not impossible, to isolate sex differences or similarities in IPV. An example of the weakness of an a-contextual approach is drawn from an early study by Hamberger, Lohr, and Bonge (1994). A female participant identified her primary motivation for her use of IPV as “control.” She then explained that her partner had a history of violence against her and she had sustained a severe head injury as a result of an assault. She decided that she needed to use force to physically restrain and remove him from her residence during subsequent violent episodes. Without her explanation of the overall context of her use of violence, her response of “control” to the question of her purpose for using IPV would have given the appearance of “mutual violence.”

The present review paper addresses three questions related to the construct of control as it relates to IPV. First, is there a common understanding of power and control or coercive control? The first goal of the present paper will be to review the literature on how the concept of control is defined, to point out differences across laboratories, and to identify areas of common agreement. A related goal will focus on the question of whether control is primarily an internal motivational state or the function of reinforcement contingencies. The second goal of the paper is to outline and critique the state of the knowledge on *measurement* of control. The third goal is to argue for a particular conceptualization of control and suggest recommendations for future research in this important area. Throughout the literature, we note the use of terms power and control, dominance and control, coercive control and control. Though there may be some differences in the respective constructs, a unifying theme across the different terminologies is control of the actions of one human being brought about by the actions of another. As such, we will characterize these functions as coercive control throughout the article, unless we are referring directly to the terminology used by a particular author.

## 1. Defining control in IPV

Control in IPV has been variously conceptualized as a goal or intention, an internal motivation, a type of behavior, an outcome, and/or a perception or subjective experience. Beck, Menke, Brewster, and Figueredo (2009) state that control is “a pattern of behaviors that can be used by one or both spouses to manipulate and control the actions of the other spouse” (p. 297). Ehrensaft, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Heyman, O’Leary, and Lawrence (1999) define control as behaviors that “...attempt to or have the effect of directing or constraining a spouse’s actions, thoughts or emotions” (p. 21). Thus, from the perspective of Ehrensaft et al. (1999), *attempts* and *effects* are the same thing in terms of control of an intimate partner. Further, to be controlling, the behavior must be perceived as negative by the recipient, thus differentiating controlling behavior from what Ehrensaft et al. characterize as mutual or normative interspousal influence (Ehrensaft et al., 1999). Dutton and Goodman (2005) define coercive power as “...the agent’s ability to impose on the target things the target does not desire, or to remove or decrease desired things” (p. 745). Thus, Dutton and Goodman differ from Ehrensaft et al., in that coercive control is contingent on the agent’s *ability* to make the imposition. Attempts to do so that are not successful are presumably not controlling in Dutton and Goodman’s model. Dutton and Goodman (2005) further elaborate that the target believes that they can and will experience negative consequences for noncompliance with the perpetrator’s demands. In fact, to be coercive, the perpetrator’s act must signal a threat of subsequent negative consequences (Dutton & Goodman, 2005). This perception by the target of

potential negative consequences is similar to Ehrensaft et al.’s position that the recipient must perceive the partner’s behavior as negative in some manner that leads to compliance.

A number of authors identify the *establishment* and exercise of dominance by one partner over another as key to coercive control (Beck et al., 2009; Cook & Goodman, 2006; Ehrensaft et al., 1999). Dominance is a function of multiple factors, including disparities in gender roles and gender role expectations (Bair-Merritt et al., 2010; Frieze, 2005; Stark, 2007). Dominance and control in relationships characterized by IPV is typically established and maintained through violence, intimidation, and/or threats (Beck et al., 2009; Cook & Goodman, 2006; Miller & White, 2003; Stark, 2006). On the other hand, coercive control is not, in itself, denoted by violent behavior. Rather, it is an *underlying dynamic* that is established and maintained by the use of violence, as well as other means (Stark, 2007; Tanha, Beck, Figueredo, & Raghavan, 2010). Nevertheless, violence is intertwined with coercive control. According to Cook and Goodman (2006), the violence may be delivered randomly and unpredictably, and results in a state of terror in the victim.

Coercion also involves outcomes that predictably and reliably occur as a result of some other action or condition. For example, when a key is inserted into a car ignition and turned to the start position, the engine starts. This is known as a contingent outcome. Hence, engine starting is contingent upon key insertion and turning to the on position. Regarding coercive control, an example of response contingency is that non-compliance with perpetrator demands leads to negative outcomes, such as violence or intimidation, whereas compliance may lead to avoidance of negative outcomes or rewards. For example, a woman reported that early in their marriage, her husband systematically beat her on a weekly basis while telling her to never go against his will. Several years after the physical violence ended, she approached him about buying a used car to aid in a job commute. When he told her he advised against it, she reacted emotionally with extreme fear, just as she had many years previously and abandoned her search for a car. Therefore, as the example illustrates, coercive control is established and maintained through contingent punishment or negative reinforcement (Dutton, Goodman, & Schmidt, 2006) and involves showing the target not only the willingness to deliver negative consequences, but the ability to do so (Day & Bowen, 2015; Dutton et al., 2006; Stark, 2006). Thus, coercive behavior may be purposeful, strategic, and goal directed, though certain behaviors may be coercive without the perpetrator’s conscious recognition of them as such (Day & Bowen, 2015; Dutton et al., 2006; Ehrensaft et al., 1999; Stark, 2006). An example of such lack of awareness of the precise contingencies is offered by a perpetrator attending a batterer intervention program who, while ending overt physical and psychological abuse received feedback from his partner that she still was afraid in conflict situations because he expressed a certain facial expression that consistently accompanied physical assaults in the past. He was not aware of his nonverbal coercive behaviors until he received that feedback. Generally, types of abusive behavior that facilitate and support coercive control include implicit and explicit forms of intimidation, actual physical and sexual violence, property destruction, and threats. Within any given relationship, however, the specific behaviors used to intimidate a target are unique to that given relationship (Stark, 2006, 2007). Specific behaviors used are based on the offender’s knowledge and assessment of the target’s vulnerabilities. Thus, the behaviors that support coercive control in one relationship may differ from those that support it in another relationship, posing a challenge to the development of universal survey measures.

Coercive control reduces the target’s power to make decisions, places limitations on independence, and diminishes the target’s self-image and strength (Ehrensaft et al., 1999; Robertson & Murachver, 2011). Multiple authors agree that coercive control impacts virtually all dimensions of the target’s life, including everyday actions, use of economic resources, relationships with family and friends, educational and occupational opportunities, sexuality, and general life activities (Bair-

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