



Abandonment and engulfment: A bimodal classification of anxiety in domestic violence perpetrators



Aaron J. Kivisto*

University of Indianapolis, School of Psychological Sciences, United States

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ABSTRACT

Multiple conceptualizations of male perpetrated domestic violence have been proposed over the last half-century. The present paper highlights the generally implicit emphasis on the central role of abandonment that unites much of this literature, and the limitations of such a singular perspective are considered. Drawing on theoretical and empirical work both within and outside of the domestic violence literature, a complementary mode of anxiety concerned with the experience of loss of oneself opposed to loss of another is identified. It is suggested that a bimodal classification of anxiety in domestic violence perpetrators that considers abandonment and engulfment as complementary modes of anxiety might provide incremental clinical utility in framing IPV as functionally proximity seeking or intimacy titrating. Implications for future research and clinical practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Violence perpetrated against one's loved ones is, at least superficially, paradoxical. What drives a person to assault and injure those they love? Empirical findings over the past 40 years have identified a 'patterned heterogeneity' among those who assault their intimate partners—although

there is no unitary profile that characterizes batterers, several generally distinct subtypes of batterers have been consistently identified by multiple research groups (Dutton, Bodnarchuk, Kropp, Hart, & Ogloff, 1997; Fowler & Westen, 2011; Hamberger & Hastings, 1986; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Saunders, 1992). These group-level findings serve to provide some order to the diverse types of violence that occur among intimate dyads as well as the diverse characteristics of those who perpetrate these acts. At the macro level, these various typologies of domestic violence perpetrators serve to provide organization to the scientifically challenging heterogeneity observed

* 1400 East Hanna Avenue, Indianapolis, IN 46227, United States. Tel.: +1 317 788 3541.

E-mail address: kivisto@uindy.edu.

among batterers. For clinicians working with batterers, courts adjudicating domestic violence cases, and for the victims and perpetrators of these violent acts, however, the question of *why* an individual harms their intimate partner remains largely unaddressed by this literature beyond inferences based on diagnostic categories.

This paper provides a brief overview of the evolving understandings of domestic violence perpetrators. The emergence and recent focus on the role of personality is emphasized and it is argued that distinguishing between two developmentally distinct modes of anxiety might further inform our understanding of the psychological precipitants of domestic violence perpetration not readily captured by the extant typology research. Previous theories of the motivations of batterers will be discussed and the assumptions inherent in these explanatory frameworks explored. The commonalities across most contemporary explanations of domestic violence as “proximity seeking” acts is highlighted, and an alternative conceptualization of specific types of domestic violence perpetration as efforts to titrate intimacy and its phenomenological correlates of engulfment and annihilatory anxiety presented. The clinical and public policy implications of these complementary conceptualizations are explored and the need for targeted future research described.

2. Towards a characterological understanding of IPV perpetration

2.1. Early explanations for domestic violence

Early twentieth century psychiatry largely ignored partner violence short of spousal homicide (Dutton, 2007), and as a result, early psychiatric understanding of perpetrators tended toward the psychopathological extreme of partner violent men. The apparent paradox of a man killing the object of his affection contributed to early conceptualizations that equated spousal homicide with madness. Various terms entered the diagnostic lexicon in the 1950's that described distinct forms of madness unique to intimate relationships; *conjugal paranoia* (Revitch, 1954), for example, described a delusional system organized around the conviction of a spouse or partner's infidelity. Todd and Dewhurst (1955) linked delusions of a partner's infidelity to acts of extreme violence in their description of the *Othello Syndrome*. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-III (DSM-III; APA, 1980) codified the diagnosis of paranoid jealousy—defined by an individual experiencing delusions regarding the fidelity of a long-term romantic partner in the absence of a history of schizophrenia, drug or alcohol abuse, or a physical illness that could cause the delusions. DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000) renamed this condition Delusional Disorder-Jealous Type, which was maintained with similar diagnostic criteria in DSM 5 (APA, 2013).

The role of jealousy as a fairly robust risk factor for IPV perpetration has accumulated further support in the sixty-plus years since conjugal paranoia was introduced and formal diagnostic criteria drafted. Makepeace (1981) found that jealousy was cited as the proximal cause of couple violence by 27% of his college student sample, making it the most frequently identified precipitant of IPV. This finding was consistent with Hilberman and Munson's (1978) and Rounsaville's (1978) research identifying jealousy as among the most common precipitants of couple violence. Utilizing relevant comparison groups, Holtzworth-Munroe, Stuart, and Hutchinson (1997) compared maritally distressed men who had engaged in partner violence to non-violent, maritally distressed and non-violent, non-maritally distressed husbands and found that husbands who had perpetrated IPV reported significantly higher levels of jealousy than both comparison groups. These findings suggest that jealousy might contribute uniquely to the perpetration of IPV, above and beyond general relational distress.

Preliminary data also suggests that severity of jealousy might be associated with the severity of intimate violence. Silva, Ferrari, Leong, and Penny (1998), for example, highlighted the association between delusional jealousy—the more severe psychopathological variant of interpersonal jealousy—and partner homicide. Soyka and Schmidt

(2011) provided further data supporting an association between delusional jealousy and extreme violence in a large-scale psychiatric inpatient sample. Delusional jealousy is, however, a rare condition, with epidemiological estimates of 0.2% prevalence in the general population (APA, 2013). Prevalence rates increase only slightly to 0.5% in inpatient psychiatric samples (Soyka & Schmidt, 2011). Given that over one million incidents of domestic violence are reported to law enforcement annually and prevalence estimates suggest that between 20 and 25% of adult women have been physically abused by a partner (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000), it reasonably follows that an exceedingly rare condition cannot account for most instances of domestic violence.

The more general notion that partner violence is the product of madness, whether rooted in pathological jealousy or not, has not withstood the test of time and multiple alternative frameworks have been put forth. Researchers beginning in the 1970's sought to identify organic brain syndromes that might differentiate those who perpetrated “normal” violence against strangers or enemies from the “abnormal” violence of IPV (Elliot, 1977); feminist theoretical explanations emphasized the socially normative role of patriarchy in males' effort to control and coerce their female partners (Bograd, 1988); and sociobiological and evolutionary explanations emphasized the role of male coercion as an effort to enhance their reproductive fitness (Buss, 1994). The feminist and sociobiological/evolutionary models of domestic violence are limited, however, in their ability to explain individual differences among males in their perpetration of domestic violence—and in particular why most men do not assault their partners (Dutton, 2007). In part due to this difficulty, researchers have suggested that the most productive approach to better understanding the origins of IPV might be to focus on the characteristics, particularly personality characteristics, that distinguish partner-violent from nonviolent males (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986).

2.2. Advances and limitations of typological approaches

Psychological approaches to understanding domestic violence quickly recognized the heterogeneity among IPV perpetrators and focused on identifying distinct subtypes. Following Makepeace's (1981) seminal work, a series of trimodal typologies were proposed that identified generally distinct types of male batterers based, at least in part, on personality characteristics. Hamberger and Hastings (1986) described the antisocial/narcissistic, schizoid/borderline, and dependent/compulsive subtypes; Saunders (1992) described the emotionally suppressed, generally violent, and emotionally volatile subtypes of batterers; Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994), integrating personality variables with the severity and generality of violence, described the family only, dysphoric/borderline, and generally violent/antisocial; and Dutton et al. (1997) proposed the “trimodal array of personality disorders” consisting of the overcontrolled (avoidant/schizoid), generally violent (antisocial), and emotionally volatile (borderline) subtypes to unite these overlapping models. Most recently, Fowler and Westen (2011) utilized clinicians' rating of domestically violent men using a Q-sort methodology and again identified a trimodal typology consisting of psychopathic, hostile/controlling, and borderline/dependent subtypes.

Identifying subtypes of batterers transitioned the field from the recognition that IPV perpetrators were a heterogeneous group to the identification of “patterned heterogeneity” (Fowler & Westen, 2011, p. 608). Despite these advances, these typologies did little to increase our understanding of the motivations of IPV perpetrators. One possible limitation of the typological approach to understanding domestic violence perpetrators is that motivations are often inferred based on diagnostic categorization. Mohandie, Meloy, McGowan, and Williams (2006) critique of stalking typologies is relevant to the IPV literature: “The more commonly cited typologies use mental health labels and *infer motivations based upon psychiatric diagnoses* [emphasis added]...Motivation...is often multidetermined and dynamic” (p. 147). Applied to the IPV literature, the

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