



Generalists versus specialists: Toward a typology of batterers in prison



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ABSTRACT

In this study we apply the versatile/specialist offender debate to the research of intimate partner violence. We propose the existence of two types of imprisoned male batterers: the generalist and the specialist batterer. The individual, family, and community characteristics of these types of batterers are further explored in 110 imprisoned males in the Penitentiary of Villabona (Spain). As for the individual characteristics, results indicate that the generalist batterer present higher levels of psychopathology (specially antisocial and borderline personality), sexist attitudes, and substance dependence. Specialist batterers presented higher levels of conflict in their family of origin. Finally, generalist batterers reported coming from more socially disordered communities and showed lower levels of participation and integration in these communities than the specialist batterer. These results suggest that the classical distinctions among batterers based on psychopathology and context of violence (whether general or family only) might be of little utility when applied to imprisoned male batterers.

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Generalistas frente a especialistas: hacia una tipología de maltratadores encarcelados

RESUMEN

En este estudio aplicamos el debate del delincuente versátil/especialista a la investigación de la violencia de pareja. Proponemos que hay dos tipos de maltratadores masculinos en prisión: el generalista y el especialista. Se profundiza en la exploración de las características familiares, individuales y comunitarias de ambos tipos de maltratadores en 110 varones encarcelados en la prisión de Villabona (España). Sobre las características individuales los resultados indican que el maltratador generalista tiene niveles elevados de psicopatología (sobre todo personalidad antisocial y límite), actitudes sexistas y dependencia de sustancias. Los maltratadores especialistas tenían niveles elevados de conflicto con la familia de origen. Por último, los maltratadores generalistas afirmaban que procedían de comunidades más desestructuradas socialmente que los maltratadores especialistas. Estos resultados indican que la distinción clásica entre maltratadores según la psicopatología y el contexto de la violencia (únicamente la general o familiar) pudiera ser poco útil en el caso de los maltratadores masculinos encarcelados.

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In the last decades, the study of typologies of batterers has provided empirical evidence on the heterogeneous nature of partner violence and has pointed out how typologies could be of help in identifying different etiological mechanisms of partner violence (Capaldi & Kim, 2007). In their influential review,

Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) proposed that batterers might be classified along three dimensions: (a) severity and frequency of marital violence, (b) generality of the violence (i.e., family-only or extrafamilial violence), and (c) batterer's psychopathology or personality disorders. Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart suggested that using these dimensions would produce three batterer subtypes: (a) family only, (b) dysphoric-borderline, and (c) generally violent-antisocial men. They estimated that around 50% of violent male partners recruited in a community

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sample would fall into the family-only batterer category, 25% into the dysphoric/borderline category, and 25% into the generally violent/antisocial category.

More recently, [Cavanaugh and Gelles \(2005\)](#) (see also [Bender & Roberts, 2007](#); [Cunha & Gonçalves, 2013](#)) used three similar dimensions – severity and frequency of violence, criminal history, and level of psychopathology – to propose three types of batterers: low-, moderate-, and high-risk offenders. Low-risk offenders showed low severity, low frequency, little or no psychopathology, and usually no criminal history. Moderate-risk offenders exhibited moderate levels of severity and frequency of violence as well as moderate to high psychopathology. High-risk offenders revealed high severity and frequency of violence, high levels of psychopathy as well as a criminal history. General ideas behind these classifications are that: a) the more general the violence (i.e., existence of criminal history), the more likely partner violence be moderate to severe; and, b) the presence of moderate to severe partner violence is related to moderate to high psychopathology.

Severity of Violence and Criminal History

Batterer's criminal history has been traditionally linked to the existence of severe violence toward partner ([Bender & Roberts, 2007](#); [Cavanaugh & Gelles, 2005](#); [Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994](#)). The most severe type of violence in [Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart's \(1994\)](#) typology belongs to the generally violent/antisocial batterer with a long criminal history, a profile that is also found by other researchers. In [Gondolf's \(1988\)](#) typology, Type I or sociopathic batterer is also violent outside the home and presents a longer criminal history than the antisocial batterer (Type II) and the typical batterer (Type III), who is similar to the family-only batterer in [Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart's](#) typology. Conversely, in [Hamberger, Lohr, Bonge, and Tonlin's \(1996\)](#) study of 204 maritally violent men, when violence is directed exclusively toward their partners it used to be less frequent, less severe, and with no psychopathology associated (the non-pathological batterer). There is empirical evidence, however, that suggests that both criminal history and severe violence toward their partners, although related, might be relatively independent (see for instance [Boyle, O'Leary, Rosenbaum, & Hasset-Walker, 2008](#)). This is especially important in studies with batterers conducted in prison, where reports of more severe violence are expected. For instance, using the typology of [Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart, Walsh et al. \(2010\)](#) found the same levels of physical violence for the generally violent/antisocial group (with longer criminal history) and the family-only violent group in a sample of civil-psychiatric patients. As it is discussed below, criminology literature on crime specialization provides theoretical arguments to anticipate that family-only batterers could be also involved in moderate to severe violence toward their partners.

Severity of Violence and Psychopathology

Both [Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart's \(1994\)](#) and [Cavanaugh and Gelles' \(2005\)](#) classifications of batterers seem to suggest a direct relationship between psychopathology and partner violence: one would expect moderate to severe psychopathology in individuals with severe violence toward their partners. There is empirical evidence about the role of psychopathology in the etiology of partner violence. In a longitudinal study of 543 participants belonging to a community sample followed over 20 years, [Ehrensaft, Cohen, and Johnson \(2006\)](#) found that men most seriously abusive toward their female partners also showed both antisocial and dramatic, emotionally dysregulated personality features (see also, [Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2003](#); [Moffitt, Robins, & Caspi, 2001](#)) and that Cluster B

symptoms (narcissistic, antisocial, histrionic, and borderline) were the only significant personality predictors of increased risk of injury to a partner. The [Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart's](#) batterer typology, as well as others, emphasizes the role of psychopathology to differentiate between groups of batterers. In their follow up of batterers, however, [Holtzworth-Munroe et al. \(2003\)](#) found that the generally violent and dysphoric/borderline groups were almost indistinguishable (see also [Delsol, Margolin, & John, 2003](#); [Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004](#)) and that level of psychopathy in these groups were similar ([Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2000](#); [Huss, Covell, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2006](#); [Walsh et al., 2010](#)). While the empirical evidence suggests that psychopathology could be on the onset of partner violence for some individuals, it might not allow to clearly distinguish between subgroups of batterers (dysphoric/borderline and generally violent/antisocial in [Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart's](#) typology; moderate and high-risk batterer in [Cavanaugh and Gelles' typology](#)).

In summary, the scientific literature on partner violence has provided empirical evidence about the heterogeneity of batterers and the most influential classifications of batterers distinguish between the less violent (family-only, low-risk offenders) and the more violent batterers (dysphoric/borderline and generally violent/antisocial; moderate and high-risk offenders). In these classifications, the batterer's severity of violence seems to be linked to the presence of an antisocial trajectory (i.e., criminal history) or severe psychopathology. In the case of imprisoned batterers, however, severity of violence tends to be present, leading to a lack of representativeness of the less violent batterer (family-only, low-risk offender). Also, as several researchers have pointed out, there seems to be an overlap between the more violent and psychologically distressed groups of batterers ([Delsol et al., 2003](#); [Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000](#); [Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2003](#); [Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004](#); [Huss, Covell, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2006](#); [Walsh et al., 2010](#)). These two circumstances limit the potential utility of the classical typologies when applied to the study of imprisoned male batterers and suggest the need for a classification that takes into account the characteristics of this population.

Generalist vs. Specialist Batterer

In the last few years, scholars have debated whether intimate partner violence might be considered different from other types of crimes. This debate has two sides: those who maintain that partner violence is a unique type of crime and those who support the idea that partner violence could be empirically indistinct from general crime. The accumulated empirical evidence in this topic is not conclusive. For instance, in their study of 2,124 offenders from a nationally representative sample of inmates from state and federal facilities in the U.S., [Felson and Lane \(2010\)](#) did not find empirical evidence supporting the idea that offenders who attacked partners were different from other offenders and could be regarded as typical offenders. [Moffitt, Krueger, Caspi, & Fagan \(2000\)](#) showed how general crime and partner violence were two different, although correlated, conceptual constructs. Using data from a longitudinal follow up for more than 20 years of 800 young adults, they found that many batterers also engaged in violence against non-intimates but the etiology of both types of violence seemed to be different as indicated by the existence of different correlates for each type of violence. For instance, low self-control (Constraint) predicted crime but not partner violence. As [Baker, Metcalfe, and Jennings \(2013\)](#) have recently pointed out, the versatility/specialization debate is both theoretical and methodological, where theories of general tendencies of antisocial behavior ([Farrington, 2005](#); [Gottfredson &](#)

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