



Concordance between partners in “intimate terrorism”: A comparison of two typologies☆



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ABSTRACT

This article analyses “Intimate Terrorism” (IT) in relationships of 14,252 university student couples. A unique conceptual and methodological contribution is conceptualizing and measuring IT at the couple-level using *Dyadic Concordance Types* (DCTs) to identify three DCTs: *Male-Only IT*, *Female-Only IT*, and *Both IT*. Data from female as well as male participants found 51% of couples *Both IT*, 16% *Male-Only*, 33% *Female-Only*. These percentages are similar to most other studies which empirically compared men and women IT, including comparisons based on child reports of inter-parent violence. They contradict Johnson’s assertion that IT is almost exclusively male. The theoretical implication is that, like other forms of partner abuse, understanding IT can be enhanced when it is conceptualized as a characteristic of couples, not just of individuals. A critique of Johnson’s criteria to identify IT concludes it is inadequate to identify cases which correspond to what is implied by “terrorism.” The research and clinical implication are that if the concept of IT is used, the data analysis or treatment plan can benefit from by identifying the cases as *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, or *Both IT*.

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1. Intimate terrorism and situational couple violence

IT is defined by Johnson as a situation in which a partner uses coercive control to establish and maintain a *general* level of dominance in the relationship. It involves more than winning one specific conflict. Although the name IT may suggest extreme physical violence, the main focus is on coercive control. The criteria to identify IT includes acts of physical assault, but they do not have to be severe. According to Johnson, there can be IT without acts of physical assault when coercive control is prevalent. The other main category in Johnson’s typology is situational couple violence (SCV). SCV involves little escalation and there tends to be a similar rate of perpetration by men and women. The violence that occurs when there is SCV is in relation to specific conflicts, not behavior intended to establish and maintain dominance in general.

The IT versus SCV typology has attracted wide interest. A search of Google Scholar for the period January 2000 to August 2013 revealed 204 papers mentioning “intimate terrorism.” There are several reasons for the wide interest. First, both the operational and theoretical definition of IT allocates a central place to *coercive control* in understanding

PV. There is wide agreement on the need to end coercive control in marital and dating relationships. Second, the IT-SCV typology recognizes the *heterogeneous* nature of PV. Third, the distinction between IT and SCV, in principle, permits theoretical progress and more focused treatment and prevention because it recognizes the diversity in PV, including that different manifestations may have different causes, different developmental trajectories, and different effects. Fourth, the IT vs SCV typology is a *couple-level* approach which recognizes that PV is a dyadic phenomenon, even when only one partner is violent. Fifth, the IT-SCV typology is perceived as resolving the gender symmetry dispute because it provides a place for cases of primary interest to both sides of the dispute. The interests of those concerned with male perpetration as a means of establishing and maintaining male dominance are addressed by the IT category. At the same time, the SCV category addresses the concerns of those who believe it is crucial to attend to the theoretical and practice implication of the more than two hundred empirical studies which found about the same percent of women and men perpetrate assaults on a partner.

This article focuses on two typologies intended to help identify, investigate treat partner abuse. Both are distinctive in using a *couple-level* measurement of abuse. Couple-level means that the measurement is based on the behavior of both partners and classifies and analyzes couples as social units in addition to the behavior of individual partners. It is important to take the characteristics of couples per se into account because, like individuals, each couple has a history and ongoing patterns of behavior. The first approach is a well-known typology in which the primary focus is to classify the relationship as being one in which

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there is “Intimate Terrorism” (IT) versus “Situational Couple Violence” (SCV) (Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). This dichotomous classification is part of a typology of violent behaviors that includes two other categories: Violent Resistance and Mutual Violent Control. The IT versus SCV distinction has been the main focus of interest and is the focus of this article. The second approach is a recently introduced typology called *Dyadic Concordance Types* (DCTs) (Straus, 2015). It classifies couples into three categories: *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, and *Both* in respect to any type of abuse, including IT or almost any behavior or characteristic that is theoretically or clinically relevant, such as sexual coercion (Michel-Smith & Straus, 2015). For this article, the relationships were classified into *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, or *Both* Intimate Terrorist (IT).

2. Dyadic concordance types

The concept of *Dyadic Concordance Types* (DCTs) is recent, but the unique importance of one of the three types (*Male-Only*) has been central since the start of efforts to reduce partner abuse. This type has been identified by terms such as “battered women” to designate relationships in which the female partner is assaulted but is not herself violent. More recently, *bi-directional* violence has been increasingly recognized (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Selwyn, & Rohling, 2012). Their review of 48 empirical studies found that about half of cases of PV are in the *Both* DCT. Another step forward has been studies which group cases into three categories of victim only, perpetrator only, and victim-perpetrator (Melander, Noel, & Tyler, 2010). DCTs also use the three logically possible categories resulting from crossing behavior by the male and female partners, but gives attention to the crucial role of gender in heterosexual partner violence by identifying the three types as *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, or *Both* assaulted.

An important characteristic of DCTs is that, like the IT-SCV typology, DCTs give empirical attention to both sides of the 35 year dispute over symmetry in perpetration of partner violence. DCTs assure that the cases of primary interest to those concerned with addressing male-perpetration are identified, and that the cases of primary interest to those concerned with addressing violence from a dyadic family systems perspective are also identified.

3. Objectives

The broad objective is to provide greater understanding of IT by using Dyadic Concordance Types (DCTs) and by an analysis of the method developed by Johnson to identify IT. The more specific objectives are:

1. When IT is part of a relationship, to estimate the percent of such couples in which only the male partner, only the female partner, or both meet Johnson's criteria for IT.
2. Use these results to evaluate the idea that IT is almost entirely a behavior of men.
3. Critically analyze the methodology used to identify IT and suggest ways the problems identified can be rectified.
4. Suggest the implications of the results for enhancing research, treatment, and prevention of aggression and violence in family relationships.

4. Method

This study analyzed data from the International Dating Violence Study. The data set, questionnaire, and all other key documents can be downloaded from the Inter-university Consortium For Political And Social Research (<http://dx.doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR29583>). The sample size for the current article is slightly larger than a previous study using the same data set (Straus & Gozjoko, 2014) because it used data which, after multiple imputation to replace missing data was slightly larger. It includes 10,175 women and 4097 men at 68 universities.

Both methodological articles such as Straus (2009) and numerous articles presenting results in peer reviewed journals such as (Douglas & Straus, 2006; Gamez-Guadix, Straus, & Hershberger, 2011; Hines, 2007; Straus, 2004, 2008, 2009; Straus & Gozjoko, 2014) demonstrate concurrent and construct validity of key measures in the IDVS data set.

5. Measure of intimate terrorism

Identification of IT followed procedures confirmed by Johnson (personal communication, 2006). We first classified each study participant and their partner as either having assaulted the partner in the previous 12 months (coded 1 or 0). As specified by Johnson, the measure does *not* differentiate minor assaults such as slapping a partner from severe assaults such as choking and punching. Then we identified ITs among those who assaulted as those who also had a coercive control score at or above the 90th percentile. This high cut point was used to be consistent with the cut points used by Johnson, such as 2.5 SD above the mean. He used such high levels of coercive control to identify ITs as those who are not among the 90% of cases he asserts are Situational Couple Violence (SCV). The coercive control scale used is described in (Straus & Gozjoko, 2014).

The four categories of Johnson's typology do not include one for *female* IT, except as part of the “Violent Resistor” type, i.e., in a relationship with male perpetrated IT. Like Frankland and Brown (2014), we therefore developed a more inclusive typology, presented in Straus and Gozjoko (2014), to allow for each of the logically possible combinations of assault and high coercive control by each gender. Additional information on the procedure to measure IT for each partner is found in Straus and Gozjoko (2014).

6. Dyadic types of intimate terrorism

Dyadic types for IT classify each *couple* in which IT occurred, into whether it was *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, or *Both* IT. To do this, each partner was coded 1 if they met Johnson's criteria for IT and 0 if they did not. This indicates the percent of *individual* men and women classified IT, but it does not identify which of the *couples* were *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, or *Both* IT. Hypothetically, 10% of the men and 10% of the women could be ITs, and at the same time, there could no relationships in the *Both* DCT. It is possible that all the male ITs were in relationships with women who were *not* ITs; and similarly, all the female ITs were coupled with men who are not ITs. To identify the couple-level IT, we cross-tabulated the variables measuring whether the participant was classified as an IT with whether his or her partner was classified as an IT. The percent in each of the four cells are the percent in each of the three DCT and in the referent category, *Neither* IT.

7. Results

7.1. Gender differences in physical assault and intimate terrorism

7.1.1. Assault

As has been found in many studies in the last 40 years, the percent who assaulted was larger in this study of students than in general population surveys (Archer, 2000; Gover, Park, Tomsich, & Jennings, 2011; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Specifically, 24% of the male students and 33% of the female students physically assaulted their partner in the 12 month period covered by the survey. Most of those assaults were “minor” such as slapping and throwing things that could hurt. However, a substantial percent were not trivial incidents. Eight percent of the men and 11% of the women perpetrated severe assaults such as choking, kicking, and punching (Straus, 2008). Moreover, 7% of the women in this study and 6% of the men suffered a physical injury as a result.

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