



## A new definition of partner violence

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to propose a new theoretical definition of partner violence (PV). This definition emphasizes “awareness that the [defined] behavior may hurt and that it is used without the other partner’s explicit (informed and free-willed) consent.” The definition is discussed at the backdrop of common perceptions and definitions of PV that emphasize “intention of causing physical pain or injury” and the Conflict Tactic Scales (CTS) that has been a widespread PV measurement among researchers and practitioners for the last 40 years. The main argument of the article is that there is a gap between the common perceptions of PV and its measurement. The proposed new definition bridges this gap. The new definition is presented and examined, and serves as an opportunity to critically revisit core issues in the study of PV. Its implications for theory, research and practice in PV prevention and intervention, stemming from the shift from intention to knowing, are also discussed.

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The article examines three definitions of physical partner violence (PV). One is a *heuristic* definition presented by Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (2006 [1980]) in their book: “*Behind closed doors: Violence in the American family*”. This definition was accepted and cited by researchers in the field of PV not as the heuristic definition, but as a theoretical definition of physical PV. Another definition examined in this study is an *operational* one, stemming from and faithfully representing the most widespread measurement instrument of physical PV for the past four decades, named the Conflict Tactic Scales (CTS) (Straus, 1979; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). An analysis of the two definitions indicates a gap between the heuristic definition, used by many as a theoretical one, and the operational definition, used in measuring physical PV. This article proposes a new definition of physical PV aimed at bridging the gap, an inherently theoretical definition that by presenting a new approach to PV ties together the previous two definitions.

### 1. Characteristics of heuristic, theoretical and operational definitions

There are different types and classifications of definitions (for examples see: Bagozzi, 1994; Moore, 2009; Swartz, 1997). The present article refers to the following three widely used definitions in social science: heuristic (also referred to as lexical), theoretical (also referred to as nominal) and operational (also referred to as observational or measurement). A heuristic definition of a phenomenon

describes how it is to be perceived and understood. Sometimes, when a heuristic definition is not explicitly specified as such, it is difficult to determine if it is a heuristic or theoretical one because both of them may share the same structure and appearance. Yet the essence of a heuristic definition is different than that of a theoretical one. A heuristic definition is no more than a succinct simple intuitive description of a broad perspective on the phenomenon defined. A heuristic definition does not necessarily delineate clear boundaries for the phenomenon it addresses.

A theoretical definition must be consistent with the heuristic one and not contradictory. In addition, a theoretical definition must take the heuristic one a step forward, clearly demarcating the boundaries of the phenomenon in reality. If the theoretical definition is consistent with the heuristic one, it should be evaluated according to the cases it does and does not identify as belonging to the phenomenon in reality. A definition is considered a good one when it identifies all and only the relevant cases of the phenomenon it defines. A theoretical definition is the foundation for the operational definition, which is another step forward leading to the identification of a phenomenon (Rubin & Babbie, 2012, p. 70).

The operational definition (Vandervert, 1988), outlined by the theoretical one, provides the means to measure, analyze and present the scope of the phenomenon. Therefore, when not all the relevant cases are identified by a theoretical definition, its operationalization may yield an underestimation of the scope of the phenomenon in reality. These unidentified cases are called “false negative”: cases that are not identified despite being part of the phenomenon. On the other hand, when the definition identifies irrelevant cases as part of the phenomenon, its operationalization may yield an

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overrepresentation of its real scope. Such irrelevant cases are called “false positive”: cases that are not part of the phenomenon despite being identified as such. Both types of false cases yield biased scope (in opposite directions), limiting the ability to estimate, analyze, study and understand a phenomenon. The operational definition has another characteristic: it simplifies the theoretical definition so that it can be applied to the study of the phenomenon. In simple words, heuristic, theoretical, and operational definitions are three necessary steps in identifying the cases that constitute a phenomenon. The first gives meaning, the second outlines boundaries, and the third specifies the contents of a phenomenon.

## 2. Terminology pertaining to PV

Although “partner violence” is a commonly used term in describing the phenomenon at hand, it is not the only one. Other synonymous or parallel terms are used to describe it as well (Winstok, 2012). The term “partner violence” refers to a behavior (violence) in a context (intimate relationships). Over the years, the two words comprising the term were presented in various forms. A variation on the word “partner” was also “intimate partner” (usually among family violence scholars) and “domestic” (mostly among gender scholars). The difference between the three variants stems from tradition more than from essence. Sometimes “partner” was also exchanged for “dating” to represent a distinct period in a relationship that precedes formal establishment (such as cohabiting and marriage, which were terms that were used in this respect as well). The second part of the term (violence) was also addressed by two additional variants, “aggression” and “abuse”. The differences may prove more significant in this case. Most, but not all, researchers using the word “violence”, refer to physical violence. Those using the words “aggression” or “abuse”, do not necessarily refer to physical violence. Aggression is in many cases a reference to non-physical hurtful actions such as psychological aggression (see Straus et al., 1996; Winstok & Sowan-Basheer, 2015). Abuse is a broad all-encompassing term for physical, psychological and sexual hurtful actions (see DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Hegarty, Sheehan, & Schonfeld, 1999). The present article discusses physical partner violence (PV), and excludes any reference to non-physical hurtful actions.

## 3. Three approaches to defining partner violence

There are three approaches, which are not mutually exclusive, to the numerous definitions of PV suggested over the years. In their purest form, each approach takes a different perspective, focusing on different aspects of PV. The most prevalent approach tends to focus on behavior, for example the definition by Straus et al. (2006 [1980]) that this article presents and examines in-depth. This approach is the least paradigmatically committed of the three. The second approach tends to focus on the causes of the behavior, for example the definition by Hart and Klein (2013), which considers violence as a means for achieving control. This approach is paradigmatically bound more than any other of the three. The first and second approaches represent the perpetrator's perspective, whereas the third approach represents the victim's, focusing on the outcomes of PV, for example the definition by DeKeseredy and MacLeod (1997), describing the physical and mental implications of PV. The three approaches are not contradictory and the definitions are often not pure, taking more than one approach, such as the following definition of physical violence by Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, and Mahendra (2015):

*“...intentional use of physical force with the potential for causing death, disability, injury, or harm. Physical violence includes, but is not limited to: scratching, pushing, shoving, throwing, grabbing, biting, choking, shaking, hair-pulling, slapping, punching, hitting, burning, use of a weapon (gun, knife, or other object), and use of restraints or one's body, size, or strength against another person. Physical violence also includes*

*coercing other people to commit any of the above acts” (Breiding et al., 2015).*

## 4. The heuristic definition of PV and its utilization as a theoretical definition

The following heuristic definition of PV was adopted by numerous scholars as a theoretical definition of it:

*“...an act carried out with the intention of or perceived intention of causing physical pain or injury to another person” (Straus et al., 2006 [1980], p. 17).*

This definition was not presented as the foundation for developing the measuring instrument of PV, (i.e., CTS) be it in its initial form (Straus, 1979) or its second version (Straus et al., 1996) or even later versions (e.g., Straus & Douglas, 2004). Although numerous scholars adopted this definition as a theoretical one (e.g., Burke, Stets, & Pirog-Good, 1988; Gelles, 1988), a minority cited it as solely heuristic (Hegarty & Roberts, 1998). Some of the former, also a minority, were aware of its theoretical limitations (Gelles, 1980). The tendency to use Straus and colleagues' heuristic definition as a theoretical one transcends PV, and was even used as a theoretical definition to study violence outside the family (e.g., Pillemer & Moore, 1989). In most cases there were no clearly conspicuous implications to this practice, but in some cases it had significant ramifications. A recent example for such significant implications is Hamby's (2014a, 2014b) proposal of a new measuring instrument of PV that operationalizes the heuristic definition as a theoretical or even as an operational definition. Due to the extensive use of this heuristic definition as theoretical, it should be examined as such.

## 5. Analysis of Straus and colleagues' heuristic definition as a theoretical definition of PV

The Straus et al. (2006 [1980]) definition presented above focuses on the perpetration of violence and not on the victimization stemming from it. It is necessary to choose to focus on perpetration, considering that the concept of PV deals with the act (i.e., violent behavior) and not its consequences. Consequences should be addressed in the case of defining “partner victimization”. Had the definition of PV perpetration addressed victimization, both false-positive and false-negative could have increased. False positive would have been obtained when there was a victim but no violence (for example, unintentional injury) and false negative when there was violence but no victim (for example, an attempted failed assault that the potential victim is unaware of).

Although the definition appears to have two prerequisites for identifying the action as violent: an action and an intention, a deeper examination reveals only one precondition: an action intended to hurt. The action is characterized solely by the actor's intention, and lacks characteristics in and of itself. Hence, Straus and colleagues' definition does not stipulate that the action must have hurtful potential (i.e., inflict or potentially inflict pain and/or injury). All it requires is that the actor intends the action to be hurtful. Success or failure to inflict pain and/or injury is irrelevant as well. An implicit assumption in the definition is that an action intended to hurt must possess hurtful potential.

Many would agree with the principle that an action with no hurtful potential is not a violent action. Most would also agree that an action with hurtful potential that is non-deliberate is not a violent action (for example, play that resulted in an injury). Wavering any of these conditions, especially the second one (non-deliberate, potentially hurtful action), in the identification of a violent action, may significantly increase the false-positive cases.

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