



Gender differences in the link between intimate partner physical violence and depression



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ABSTRACT

Studies show that, in violent relationships, both partners suffer from higher levels of depression than in non-violent relationships. Most of these studies were based on samples of battered women. Very little research has examined the depression levels of women who physically assault a marital or dating partner or men who assault or are victims of female assaults. Moreover, the association between intimate partner physical violence and depression does not provide a theoretical framework or an explanation for the differences in depression levels of male and female perpetrators and victims. This article presents a preliminary, yet empirically grounded, foundation for explaining research findings on depression levels for males and females in three “Dyadic Types” of intimate partner physical violence: Male-Only, Female-Only, and Both Violent. The theoretical framework involves identifying the relation of intimate partner physical violence to be of greater male than female concern with status enhancement and greater female than male concern with risk reduction, and how these play out in each of the Dyadic Types.

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1. Introduction

Intimate partner physical violence and depression are two widespread phenomena awarded much attention and concern in many societies (e.g., Caldwell, Swan, & Woodbrown, 2012; Graham, Bernards, Flynn, Tremblay, & Wells, 2012; Zacarias, Macassa, Soares, Svanström, & Antai, 2012). Although partner violence and depression are independent and distinct phenomena, studies reveal a consistent and strong

association, albeit not necessarily a causal one, between the two. The objective of this article is to provide a brief review of relevant literature and propose a preliminary yet empirically grounded foundation for explaining research findings on depression levels. A starting point for achieving a more adequate understanding of the link between intimate partner physical violence and depression is to acknowledge that depression is not just one more indicator of the mental cost of intimate partner physical violence but is also an indicator of perceptions, motivations, and experiences that affect and are affected by how the partners in a violent relationship behave in and cope with challenges in their relationship and their lives. Such understanding emphasizes the importance of studying the relationship between partner violence and depression, as it broadens the scope of the theoretical and practical implications inherent in this relationship.

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Studies on the association between intimate partner physical violence and depression concluded that individuals living in a physically violent relationship suffer from greater levels of depression than those in a non-violent relationship (e.g., Caetano & Cunradi, 2003; Mburia-Mwalili, Clements-Nolle, Lee, Shadley, & Yang, 2010; Vaeth, Ramisetty-Mikler, & Caetano, 2010). This conclusion is based mainly on studies of depression among women who were victims of their partners' physical aggression (e.g., Nathanson, Shorey, Tirone, & Rhatigan, 2012). Other cases of depression, such as among men who assaulted their partners, women who assaulted their partners, or men who were assaulted by their partners received insufficient, if any, attention. The question thus far largely ignored by the research is whether it is only women who pay a mental as well as a physical price for being a victim of intimate partner physical violence. The few studies that did not examine depression among battered women exclusively demonstrate that the association between intimate partner physical violence and depression is more complex. However, those studies failed to provide a detailed theoretical explanation linking gender, role in intimate partner physical violence, and depression. It is argued that the scarcity of studies of the relationship between intimate partner physical violence and depression in both genders, and in different types of intimate partner physical violence such as the types identified by Holtzworth-Munroe (2000) (i.e., "Family-Only," "Low-Level Family and Antisocial," "Dysphoric-Borderline, and "Generally Violent-Antisocial") or the types suggested by Johnson (2006) (i.e., "Intimate Terrorism," "Violent Resistance," "Situational Violence," and "Mutual Violent Control"), impedes our ability to understand the various aspects of the problem and offer effective solutions.

As mentioned, the objective of this article is to propose a preliminary, yet empirically grounded, foundation for explaining research findings on depression levels in three "Dyadic Types" of intimate partner physical violence (Male-Partner Only perpetration, Female Partner only, and Both Assault) (Straus, 2013). This explanation is conceptualized as a theoretical framework that can be used for reformulating gender theories of intimate partner physical violence that go beyond patriarchal theories in this field.

2. Gender differences in intimate partner physical violence

Gender is the first major component in the present study. Even after receiving special attention in four decades of partner violence research, the study of gender in this context has yet to be exhausted.

For many years, two divergent perspectives on the role of gender in partner violence steered research and practice. Johnson (2006), a feminist scholar, described the controversy as follows:

The long-standing argument in the family literature regarding the gender symmetry of intimate partner violence takes the form of a disagreement about the nature of heterosexual intimate partner violence, as if heterosexual partner violence were a single phenomenon. One side of the debate, generally referred to as the feminist perspective (Kurz, 1989), presents compelling empirical evidence that heterosexual intimate partner violence is largely a problem of men assaulting female partners (Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992). The other side, generally taken in the family violence perspective, presents equally compelling empirical evidence that women are at least as violent as men in such relationships (Straus, 1999). (p. 1004).

The term "Gender Symmetry" is central to the controversy and conveys the notion that a significant (but not necessarily equal) proportion of both genders use violence in their intimate relationships (Straus, 2011; Winstok, 2011, 2012). Despite many years of partner violence research, the controversy is yet to be resolved.

A large body of empirical evidence tends to support the gender symmetry concept in perpetration of physical assaults against partners (Desmarais, Reeves, Nicholls, Telford, & Fiebert, 2012; Straus, 2011; Winstok, 2011, 2012). A recent review of 48 studies which obtained data on the behavior of both partners found that the typical pattern was that about half the cases were couples in the Both-Assault type, about a quarter were couples in the Male-Only type, and about a quarter were in the Female-Only type (see review: Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Selwyn, & Rohling, 2012). These results were found to apply to severe as well as minor assaults, to estimates based on data provided by women as well as by men, regardless of the instrument used to measure intimate partner physical violence, and to studies conducted in many nations. The multi-nation applicability of Dyadic Types was recently confirmed by a 15-nation study (Straus & Michel-Smith, in press).

Considerable evidence of gender symmetry exists in the etiology of intimate partner physical violence. For instance, dominance by one partner (either man or woman) increases the probability of assault (Eisikovits, Winstok, & Gelles, 2002; Kim & Clifton, 2003; Medeiros & Straus, 2007; Straus, 2008; Sugihara & Warner, 2002; Winstok, Eisikovits, & Gelles, 2002). Moreover, it appears that only a small percentage of physical partner violence cases involve male dominance and female degradation (Gelles & Straus, 1988; Kantor & Straus, 1990; Straus & Gozjolko, in press). The assumption that female physical violence acts are of self-defense was found to be true only in a small number of incidents (Carrado, George, Loxam, Jones, & Templar, 1996; Cascardi & Vivian, 1995; Dekeseredy, Saunders, Schwartz, & Shahid, 1997; Eisikovits & Buchbinder, 2000; Felson & Messner, 1998; Pearson, 1997; Straus, 2012).

Although the accumulated empirical knowledge tends to support the idea of gender symmetry in perpetration and etiology, it is important to emphasize that most studies show that women suffer more injuries than men. In some studies, the injury differences are large and in others, they are small. An example of large gender differences can be found in the second survey on family violence in the general population in the US performed in 1985. The survey (Stets & Straus, 1990) indicates large differences: 3% of women and 0.4% of men required medical attention as a result of a violent incident with their partner. Simpson and Christensen (2005), who studied this issue using a service population sample, found larger rates of injury but smaller gender differences: 11.7% of women reported being injured in a conflict with their partner; 17.9% of women reported that their partner was injured in a conflict with them; 18.3% of men reported that their partner was injured in a conflict with them; 15.4% of men reported being injured in a conflict with their partner.

3. Types of violent relationships

Alongside the evidence regarding the perpetration and etiology of physical partner violence, it was also recognized that such violence consisted of various types. The type of violent relationship is the second major component in the present study, expressing the context in which the link between gender (first component) and depression (third component to be further discussed) exists. Several typologies of violent relationships are proposed in partner violence literature; some are complex, vague, or theoretically biased—especially in the context of gender. Three criteria were used in the present article in the selection and representation of the type of violent relationship: simplicity, theoretical neutrality, and gender sensitivity.

Several typologies of perpetrators have been developed (e.g., Chase, O'Leary, & Heyman, 2001; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Johnson, 2006; Tweed & Dutton, 1998). Most of these typologies are complex. The Holtzworth-Munroe types, for example, require administering several tests, some of them lengthy. Another example is Johnson's typology, which is unspecific as to how its characteristics should be operationalized and then interpreted (Winstok, 2012).

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