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Gender and types of intimate partner violence: A response to an anti-feminist literature review

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a feminist perspective on domestic violence that is rooted in an explication of the differences among three major types of intimate partner violence (Johnson, 2008). Theory and research from this perspective is then reviewed to rebut recent attacks on feminist scholarship and policy regarding intimate partner violence.

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1. Introduction

The most recent of a series of anti-feminist attacks from Dutton, Hamel, and their colleagues is "The gender paradigm in family court processes: Re-balancing the scales of justice from biased social science"(Dutton, Hamel, & Aaronson, 2010), an ironic title, given the panoply of biases with which it itself is riddled. In this particular article they claim to expose two recent papers (Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, 2008; Kelly & Johnson, 2008) as biased and unsupported by research evidence. Responding to this particular attack is useful in itself, but their article also serves as a good example of the substance and tactics of their more general anti-feminist critique. In the process of responding here to their allegations about feminist theory and research, I hope to accomplish two goals. First, I will present a feminist perspective on domestic violence that is rooted in an explication of the differences among the major types of intimate partner violence (Johnson, 2008). Second, theory and research from this perspective will be used to rebut the Dutton et al. claims about what they call "the gender paradigm," which includes my own work.

2. A feminist perspective on domestic violence

It is probably useful to begin by saying that there is more than one feminist understanding of the nature of domestic violence, more than one "gender paradigm," just as there are multiple feminist perspectives on anything. What I will present here is my feminist perspective on the nature of intimate partner violence, a perspective formed primarily from a wide reading of over thirty years of research on "domestic violence," and informed by feminist perspectives from my home discipline of sociology.

2.1. A feminist perspective on types of intimate partner violence

The core proposition of this perspective is simple: there is more than one type of intimate partner violence, and the major types differ dramatically in almost all respects (Johnson, 2008). The typology that I began developing in the early 1990s is organized around the concept of coercive controlling violence, a pattern of behaviors identified by feminists working in the battered women's movement as the type of intimate partner violence that was reported by women coming to shelters to seek help (Pence & Paymar, 1993). There are three major types.

2.1.1. Intimate terrorism

This is the pattern of violent coercive control that comes to mind for most people when they hear the term "domestic violence". Although it probably represents a small part of all of the violence that takes place between partners in intimate relationships, it is the type of violence that predominates among the cases that come to the attention of law enforcement, shelters and other public agencies, and that therefore has been the prototype of domestic violence for the battered women's movement (see almost any shelter Web site). It involves the combination of physical and/or sexual violence with a variety of non-violent control tactics, such as economic abuse, emotional abuse, the use of children, threats and intimidation, invocation of male privilege, constant monitoring, blaming the victim, threats to report to immigration authorities, or threats to "out" a person to work or family.

Although this is the type of violence initially identified by the battered women's movement as characteristic of the male violence encountered in shelters and law enforcement, it is not exclusively male-perpetrated, having been identified in lesbian couples (Renzetti, 1992) and among some women who terrorize their male partners (Cook, 1997; Hines & Douglas, 2010). The data are clear, however, that the primary perpetrators in heterosexual couples are men (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; Johnson, 2006a, 2008). It is also clear from the research of Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart (2000) and from a major literature review (Sugarman & Frankel, 1996) that misogyny and gender traditionalism play an important role in heterosexual intimate terrorism.[1]

2.1.2. Violent resistance

Many victims of intimate terrorism do respond with violence of their own. For some, this is an instinctive reaction to being attacked, and it happens at the first blow—almost without thought. For others, it doesn't happen until it seems that the assaults will continue forever if something isn't done to stop them. For most women in heterosexual relationships, the size difference between them and their male partner ensures that violent resistance won't help, and may make things worse, so they turn to other means of coping. For a few, eventually it seems that the only way out is to kill their partner.

2.1.3. Situational couple violence

This is violence that is not part of a general pattern of coercive control, but rather occurs when couple conflicts become arguments that turn to aggression that becomes violent. It is by far the most common form of intimate partner violence, and also the most variable. Somewhere around 40% of the cases identified in general surveys involve only one relatively minor incident, but many cases do involve chronic and/or serious, even life-threatening, violence. In contrast to intimate terrorism, situational couple violence does not involve an attempt on the part of one partner to gain general control over the other, and unlike intimate terrorism and violent resistance it is roughly gender-symmetric in terms of perpetration. The violence is situationally-provoked, as the tensions or emotions of a particular encounter lead one or both of the partners to resort to violence.

2.2. A feminist perspective on sampling biases

Here is another simple proposition: all of our major sampling methods are biased, with the result that they yield samples that differ dramatically in the representation of the major types of intimate partner violence. So-called random sample surveys are biased because of high rates of non-response, beginning with non-response to the brief screening interview for eligibility that often precedes the request for a full interview. Response rates often do not reflect that initial refusal to answer even the screening questions. For example, the National Family Violence Surveys that report an 82% response rate actually have a 60% response rate if non-response to the screening questions is included (Johnson, 1995). Because intimate terrorism and violent resistance have low base rates to begin with, and because perpetrators and victims of intimate terrorism are highly likely to refuse to respond to surveys – perpetrators because they do not wish to implicate themselves, victims because they fear reprisals from their partner – the violence in general surveys is heavily dominated by situational couple violence.

Agency studies are biased not by non-response as much as by the nature of the sampling frame itself. Because only serious or chronic violence tends to come to the attention of law enforcement, shelters, hospitals, and other such agencies, the violence in agency data or in surveys conducted in these settings is heavily biased in the direction of intimate terrorism and violent resistance. Similar biases are found in help lines, voluntary on-line databases, and other sources of information that involve *safe* self-reporting, but the general point here

[1] Although the Sugarman and Frankel meta-analysis found a strong relationship between gender traditionalism and male intimate partner violence ($d = .54$), more telling is an important interaction effect that they do not include in their major conclusions. The relationship between gender traditionalism and intimate partner violence is quite strong in samples that are likely to be dominated by intimate terrorism ($d = .80$) and tiny for samples that are likely to be dominated by situational couple violence ($d = -.14$).