



Gender differences in self-reports of intimate partner violence: A review

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 July 2010

Received in revised form 17 February 2011

Accepted 21 February 2011

Keywords:

Reporting

Under-reporting

Gender symmetry

Intimate partner violence

ABSTRACT

Past studies on intimate partner violence (IPV) have revealed mixed findings about its prevalence across gender. Some support gender symmetry in IPV, such that men and women are equally likely to perpetrate IPV; others show evidence of gender asymmetry, such that men are far more likely to be perpetrators in a violent intimate relationship. This paper reviews the literature on gender symmetry in IPV. Explanations have been suggested for the discrepancy in past findings, including gender differences in reporting styles. Most studies have pointed to a possibility of under-reporting in both men's and women's self-reports of IPV, although the patterns of under-reporting vary. Factors affecting the reporting patterns across gender, the limitations of existing studies and suggestions for future research on gender differences in IPV reporting are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Research on intimate partner violence (IPV) often attempts to determine whether there are gender differences in the prevalence,

frequency, and severity of violence against intimate partners. To date, researchers have not arrived at a consensus, and the question of whether the prevalence of IPV varies as a function of gender is under dispute. Past research has led to two main conclusions (Archer, 2000). Some studies show that men perpetrate more partner violence than women (Dobash & Dobash, 1988; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998), whereas others show that women are as violent as men and that most violent acts are actually mutual and bidirectional (i.e., both

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partners are violent). These findings, therefore, have supported a gender-symmetric theory of the prevalence of IPV (Straus, 1990; Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1994).

In a review of IPV literature, Archer (2000) has noted two possible explanations for the mixed and inconclusive findings for gender symmetry or asymmetry in the IPV prevalence. One of them is the failure of existing measures (e.g., the Conflict Tactics Scales; CTS) to assess the context, motives, causes, and consequences of IPV (Dutton, 1994). And the ignorance of these factors may favor the finding of gender symmetry in violence prevalence. Another is the disparity in the samples used in different studies. In particular, the use of representative or community samples may result in very different results from using clinical samples (Johnson, 1995). In general, most IPV cases revealed in surveys were minor, infrequent, and mutual, whereas most officially reported cases involved severe violence against women that required medical attention (Straus, 1997).

Apart from the two reasons for the discrepancy in previous findings on IPV prevalence as suggested by Archer (2000), gender differences in the reporting or disclosure of violence may serve as another possible explanation. The most common assessment method in past studies is self-report, which relies heavily on the integrity of the respondents. However, reporting biases are primarily inevitable. Men and women often exhibit different styles of disclosure; and researchers generally agree that gender can affect an individual's reporting of violence, which in turn influence the research findings and conclusions (Caetano, Field, Ramisetty-Mikler, & Lipsky, 2009; Caetano, Schafer, Field, & Nelson, 2002; Dobash & Dobash, 2004).

The present review attempts to provide an update for the evidence supporting gender symmetry and gender asymmetry in IPV prevalence respectively, and evaluate the gender differences in violence reporting as shown in IPV literature. Prior reviews or meta-analyses on gender issues on IPV are often not up-to-date (e.g., Archer, 2000, 2002) or intentionally conducted as informal narrative reviews (e.g., Fiebert, 1997, 2009). A thorough, systematic review of the IPV prevalence across gender can help professionals to better understand IPV and facilitate more effective allocation of resources to combat the problem. The present paper also explores the factors which potentially lead to the different violence reporting styles across gender.

2. Methods

2.1. Search strategy

The PsycInfo (focusing on psychological research), Medline (focusing on biomedical and life sciences research), Social Services Abstracts (focusing on social work and social policy), and Sociological Abstracts (focusing on social structure and social problems) databases were searched using combinations of the terms "intimate partner violence", "spousal violence", "domestic violence", "prevalence", "gender symmetry", "gender asymmetry", "gender difference", and "gender" for publications relevant to IPV prevalence across gender during 1998 to May 2010. The choice of this time period was to avoid duplication with prior reviews (Archer, 2000, 2002).

For the difference in IPV reporting across gender, the above four databases were searched using mixtures of the terms "intimate partner violence", "spousal violence", "domestic violence", "prevalence", "gender", "reporting", and "agreement" for relevant publications during 1980 to May 2010.

Judgments about the eligibility of studies for the present review were made by a researcher trained in psychology and then by the author. When there was doubt about the eligibility, the author and the researcher read and discussed the paper until consensus was reached.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

For studies of gender symmetry or asymmetry in IPV prevalence, they were included if they met *all* of the following criteria: (1) it was an empirical study or a meta-analytical study; (2) it primarily concerned gender differences in the prevalence of IPV; and (3) it was published between 1998 and May 2010.

For studies of gender differences in IPV reporting, they had to meet *all* of the following criteria: (1) it was an empirical study, or a meta-analytical study; (2) it primarily concerned gender differences in the reporting of IPV; (3) it compared reporting of IPV across gender with the use of matched couple data, i.e. the data of which partners of the same couple were paired up; and (4) it was published between 1980 and May 2010.

On the other hand, studies were excluded if they met *any* of the following criteria: (1) it did not compare the IPV rates across gender, and (2) it was not in the English language.

2.3. Examples of excluded studies

Some studies were close to meeting the inclusion criteria but were excluded eventually. Most of them did not meet *all* of the inclusion criteria. Some were neither an empirical study nor a meta-analysis that compares IPV prevalence across gender (criterion 1). For example, Hamberger (2005) reviewed research on IPV using a model which incorporates the differences in motivations and impacts of IPV across gender. In a few other studies, gender differences in the self-reported IPV were explored. However, they did not use couple data which allow the comparison of self-reported IPV incidence between partners. For example, McFarlane, Willson, Malecha, and Lemmey (2000) compared the severity of IPV reported by gender using a sample of 90 men and 10 women who intended to file charges of assault.

3. Results

A total of 258 titles were obtained from the database search results after removing duplicates. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, two meta-analytical studies and 21 empirical studies remained for review in the present paper.

3.1. Gender differences in the prevalence of IPV

Two meta-analytical and 13 empirical studies focused on gender differences in IPV. Table 1 summarizes the findings of the meta-analyses and Table 2 summarizes the methodologies and results of the empirical studies.

3.1.1. Findings of meta-analytical studies

Findings of meta-analyses generally support the claim that minor IPV was mutual in community samples, and more severe IPV was more likely to be perpetrated by men. Archer (2000) investigated gender differences in physical violence against heterosexual partners. The analysis covered 82 studies published from 1976 to June 1997 and results show that the number of violent acts and the frequency of perpetrating violence were greater among women than men ($d = -.05$), while the likelihood of inflicting an injury to partners were greater among men than women ($d = .15$). In all samples of the studies analyzed, 62% of injured victims were women.

In a more recent meta-analysis, Archer (2002) reviewed 58 studies published from 1976 to 1998 to investigate the gender differences in the use of various types of IPV. The author used odds ratios (ORs) to indicate the effect size of the gender difference: an OR smaller than 1.0 indicated a greater likelihood of female than male perpetration while an OR greater than 1.0 indicated the reverse. Findings show that men were more likely to beat up, choke or

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