

WOMEN'S VIOLENCE TO MEN IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Working on a Puzzle

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Different notions among researchers about the nature of intimate partner violence have long been the subjects of popular and academic debate. Research findings are contradictory and point in two directions, with some revealing that women are as likely as men to perpetrate violence against an intimate partner (symmetry) and others showing that it is overwhelmingly men who perpetrate violence against women partners (asymmetry). The puzzle about who perpetrates intimate partner violence not only concerns researchers but also policy makers and community advocates who, in differing ways, have a stake in the answer to this question, since it shapes the focus of public concern, legislation, public policy and interventions for victims and offenders. The question of who are the most usual victims and perpetrators rests, to a large extent, on 'what counts' as violence. It is here that we begin to try to unravel the puzzle, by focusing on concept formation, definitions, forms of measurement, context, consequences and approaches to claim-making, in order better to understand how researchers have arrived at such apparently contradictory findings and claims. The question also turns on having more detailed knowledge about the nature, extent and consequences of women's violence, in order to consider the veracity of these contradictory findings. To date, there has been very little in-depth research about women's violence to male partners and it is difficult, if not impossible, to consider this debate without such knowledge. We present quantitative and qualitative findings from 190 interviews with 95 couples in which men and women reported separately upon their own violence and upon that of their partner. Men's and women's violence are compared. The findings suggest that intimate partner violence is primarily an asymmetrical problem of men's violence to women, and women's violence does not equate to men's in terms of frequency, severity, consequences and the victim's sense of safety and well-being. But why bother about the apparent contradictions in findings of research? For those making and implementing policies and expending public and private resources, the apparent contradiction about the very nature of this problem has real consequences for what might be done for those who are its victims and those who

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are its perpetrators. Worldwide, legislators, policy makers and advocates have developed responses that conceive of the problem as primarily one of men's violence to women, and these findings provide support for such efforts and suggest that the current general direction of public policy and expenditure is appropriate.

Introduction

Violence against women by an intimate male partner is now recognized throughout most of the world as a significant social problem. It has been identified by many countries, the United Nations and the European Union as an issue of human rights (United Nations 1995; Kelly 1997; Journal of Violence against Women (JrVAW) 2001). In the past two decades, significant changes in policies and practices have occurred worldwide, but particularly in the United States, Britain, Canada and Australia (Dobash and Dobash 1979; 1992; Schechter 1982; Heise 1994; Stubbs 1994; Mullender 1996; JrVAW 2001; Schneider 2002). The majority of changes have been in the areas of community support, public policy, social services and civil and criminal law and law enforcement.

On a daily basis, police, hospital emergency services, social services and voluntary organizations struggle with questions about how best to help victims who seek assistance because of violent episodes. Their focus is on injuries, homelessness, dislocation of children from their homes and schools, emotional stress and a raft of other problems experienced by the women who seek assistance for themselves and their children. Almost all pragmatic interventions in the form of emergency services, programmes and other responses are primarily designed to deal with the serious problem of male violence against an intimate female partner, and not the obverse. For the most part, legislators, policy makers, legal and social service professionals and community advocates have dealt with the issue of 'domestic violence' as primarily a problem of men's violence against a woman partner. Across these organizations in countries throughout the world, the operating definition of the problem they confront is overwhelmingly one of male violence against a female partner. For them, violence against women is *the* problem and the one in need of urgent solution.

The pragmatic experience of most community advocates and professionals dealing with violence between intimates on a regular basis and the research findings of most social scientists studying this phenomenon agree that 'intimate partner violence' is overwhelmingly an issue of male violence against a female partner. However, the findings of some social scientist, particularly in the United States, appear to support the notion that the phenomenon is equally likely to be women's violence against a male partner, and some even claim that women are more likely than men to be violent to their intimate partner.

Thus, the question becomes one of who is likely to use violence against an intimate partner: men, women or both? At stake for researchers and others is how the problem is conceptualized (as men's violence against women, as women's violence against men, as equivalent and/or reciprocal violence by men and by women). Also at stake, although less so for researchers than for policy makers and practitioners in criminal justice and social services, is the nature of actions to be taken in search of a remedy to the problem as defined and identified. If one accepts the notion that there should be a relationship between the nature of any social issue and the form of policies and interventions seeking a solution, then this contradiction in definitions and findings about 'intimate partner

violence' has serious implications for policy and intervention. That is, if the problem is one of men's violence against women (asymmetry), then the current policies and practices are apt. If the problem is one of the equivalence of violence perpetrated by men and by women (symmetry), then the direction of current policies and practices is inappropriate and needs to be fundamentally transformed.

Different notions among researchers about the nature of 'domestic violence' (asymmetrical or symmetrical) have long been the subjects of popular and academic debate. Within the area of research, contradictory findings constitute a puzzle. Working on this puzzle is the task of this paper. The question is whether men and women are equally likely to perpetrate violence in an intimate relationship or whether it is primarily men who do so. In order to address this, we will focus on concept formation, definitions, forms of measurement, context, consequences and approaches to claim-making in order better to understand how researchers arrived at such apparently contradictory findings and claims. We then examine in some detail the nature, severity and consequences of violence perpetrated by women against male partners, in order to consider more carefully the nature of the violence that forms the claim of symmetry of violence between women and men.

In order to examine women's violence, we present findings from a study that included 95 couples in which men and women reported separately upon the violence in their relationship. This included both men's violence against women partners and women's violence against male partners in terms of the nature, frequency, severity and physical and emotional consequences. A close examination of women's violence is especially important because there is a need to reflect on both men's and women's violent behaviour in order to consider the veracity of these contradictory findings. To date, there has been very little in-depth research about women's violence to male partners and it is difficult, if not impossible, to consider this debate without such knowledge. But why bother about the apparent contradictions in findings from research? For those making and implementing policies and expending public and private resources, the apparent contradiction about the very nature of this problem has real consequences for what might be done for those who are its victims and those who are its perpetrators.

Symmetry or Asymmetry in the Perpetration of Violence to an Intimate Partner?

Over the last three decades, knowledge about intimate partner violence or 'domestic violence' has grown exponentially. From the outset, there has been disagreement among researchers about definitions, methods and the resulting findings regarding the direction and impact of violence between men and women in intimate relationships. Elsewhere, we have characterized the two approaches to research as 'family violence' (FV) and 'violence against women' (VAW) (Dobash and Dobash 1992: 258–84). While these approaches are relatively distinct, there are elements that overlap and, thus, comparisons need to be treated as characterizations rather than absolutes.

Family violence research

Family violence (FV) researchers claim that intimate partner violence is symmetrical, with men and women equally likely to be the perpetrator of violence against an intimate partner. In attempting to establish the prevalence of violence in relationships, FV

researchers have primarily relied on the measurement of discrete 'acts', e.g. 'slap' or 'punch', as the primary or sole source of data about the violence of individual respondents. Using this 'act-based' approach, FV researchers have variously claimed that intimate partner violence is 'symmetrical' and 'reciprocal' (each gives as good as they get), or that women perpetrate more violence and are more likely than men to use 'severe' violence against a male partner (Straus and Gelles 1990; Morse 1995; Moffitt, Robins and Caspi 2001). Some 'act-based' measurements include sexual violence and show that men are equally as likely to report sexual violence/abuse from their female partner as the obverse. In some surveys, men are more likely than women to report sexual victimization by their partner. One US study of University students found that 38 per cent of the men and 30 per cent of the women reported at least one incident of sexual coercion from an intimate partner of the opposite sex. Using a sexual chronicity scale, men reported more incidents than women (18.5 vs 11.8 incidents) (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy and Sugarman 1996).

FV researcher's further suggest that women's violence to a male partner cannot be construed as 'self-defence' because they claim that women are equally likely to initiate violence (Stets and Straus 1990: 161), and because the 'individual characteristics' of women who use such violence parallel those of their violent male partner (Moffitt *et al.* 2001). With no consideration of the sequence of acts involved in a violent event and based on the notion of similar 'individual characteristics likely to predict abuse', FV researchers assume equivalence in men's and women's motivations and, in turn, the likelihood that the violence may have been used in self-defence (Moffitt *et al.* 2001: 25, n. 8). Further, this 'act-based' approach to the measurement of violence is usually based on the assumption that men and women can and do provide unbiased, reliable accounts of their own violent behaviour and that of their partner. Using this approach, reports of violence and injuries from men or women, from victims or perpetrators, about oneself or about one's partner are all treated as unproblematic and as a solid evidentiary basis for estimates of prevalence and the development of explanatory accounts (Morse 1995; Moffitt, Caspi, Krueger, Magdol, Margolin, Silva and Sydney 1997; Archer 1999).

Despite the claims of equal violence by men and by women, policy suggestions regarding women's violence are not generally offered. However, a prominent proponent of the 'symmetry' thesis has noted that 'assaults by women are a serious social problem', and suggests that '...assaults by wives are one of the many *causes* of wife beating [our emphasis]...' (Straus 1993: 78, 80). As such, it is the responsibility of 'wives' to refrain from physical attacks on their male abuser 'no matter what the provocation' (Straus 1993: 80). Furthermore, if women's 'assaults' cause more male violence, then public policy and practices should change accordingly, '...including public service announcements, police arrest policy, and treatment programmes for batterers' (Straus 1993: 80). According to this notion, ending male violence against women is at least partially dependent on women ending their violence against men. Stressing the supposed equivalent and reciprocal nature of men's and women's violence both as perpetrators and as victims, others propose conjoint, couple therapy in order to deal with this problem (Moffitt 2001: 27).

Violence against women research

VAW researchers claim that intimate partner violence is asymmetrical, with men more likely than women to perpetrate violence against an intimate partner. Historical and

contemporary evidence from many societies indicates that lethal and non-lethal intimate partner violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women (Dobash and Dobash 1979; 1992; Pleck 1987; Gordon 1988; Daly and Wilson 1988; Levinson 1989; Dobash, Dobash, Wilson and Daly 1992; Wilson and Daly 1992, 1998; Kurz 1993; Bourgois 1995; Nazroo 1995; Descola 1996; Dobash *et al.*, 2004). For example, when men and women are asked to report on victimization throughout their lifetime (ever prevalence), women report at least two to four times more violence than men, and women are much more likely to report chronic levels of abuse (Gaquin 1977/78; Schwartz 1987; Sacco and Johnson 1990; Bachman and Saltzman 1995; Tjaden and Thoennes 1998; Mirrless-Black 1999). Direct measures of the consequences of violent acts suggest that women are much more likely than men to report physical injuries and emotional and psychological effects (e.g. depression, anxiety and fear) as a result of men's violence toward them (Schwartz 1987; Campbell 1998; Dobash and Dobash 2001). Ironically, FV researchers acknowledge that women are six to ten times more likely than men to sustain serious injuries as a consequence of violent acts by their partner (Straus 1993; Gelles 1997: 93) but some, nonetheless, continue to claim that women are more likely than men to perpetrate violence, including 'severe' violence, against an intimate partner. What might this mean?

VAW researchers stress that in order to understand this violence, it should be studied within the wider context of ongoing violent events and intimate relationships. Violent events should also be studied within the context of actions and intentions associated with the event and its aftermath. Purely 'act-based' approaches rarely consider contextual issues that promote fuller understandings and more adequate explanations of such events. When one considers the violent event in the context of an intimate relationship, evidence suggests that men's physical and sexual violence against women is often associated with a 'constellation of abuse' that includes a variety of additional intimidating, aggressive and controlling acts (Pence and Paymar 1993; Dobash *et al.* 2000; Gondolf 2002). Physical and sexual acts of violence and the wider 'constellation of abuse' may result in physical injuries as well as other related emotional and/or economic consequences for victims as men seek to control and regulate the lives of women partners (Browne, Salomon, Bassuk 1999; Campbell 1999; Lloyd and Taluc 1999; MacMillan and Gartner 1999). Such consequences and the wider 'constellation of abuse' are not evident in reports about women's violence against male partners.

Researchers who study the whole violent event, rather than a list of 'acts' that may have occurred across many such events, find that women's violence (lethal and non-lethal) is often associated with self-defence and/or retaliation against a male partner. This frequently occurs after years of physical abuse from the male partner (Berk, Berk, Loseke and Rauma 1983; Browne 1987; Daly and Wilson 1988; Browne, Williams and Dutton 1999). Professionals who work with male abusers also find that the violence women direct at male partners usually, though not always, occurs in a context of ongoing violence and aggression by men directed at women (Saunders 1988; Pence and Paymar 1993; Miller 2001).

Defining, Measuring and Reporting Intimate Partner Violence and Abuse

The debates in this arena are often highly political but here we wish, instead, to focus on methodological issues in order to consider the 'puzzle' of how the FV and VAW approaches to research have resulted in such different findings. We begin with the

assumption that theoretical and methodological approaches to research (including concepts, definitions and measurement) shape the nature of what is studied and the findings produced, which, in turn, inform policies and practices (Dobash and Dobash 1990a; 1990b). We consider the different approaches of FV research and VAW research to the issues of how violence is conceptualized and measured, and how findings are reported, followed by a close examination of the violence perpetrated by women. These form important keys to the puzzle. This, in turn, is used to consider what conclusions might be drawn about the similarities and differences between violence perpetrated by women and that perpetrated by men.

Measuring and reporting violence and abuse

The attempt to bring rigor, precision, clarity and understanding to the study of the social world is both necessary and worthy. It is not, however, an easy or straightforward task, as the complex and 'messy' nature of everyday life is distilled into various measures or assessments that are meant to represent or 'stand-in' for the complexity of life. Both FV research and VAW research attempt to do this, but the breadth and depth of what is studied vary with each approach. VAW research is wider in scope and has more depth and detail in what is studied, while FV research is narrow in scope, depth and detail. VAW research examines violent 'acts', violent 'events' and the context and consequences in which they occur, while FV research focuses almost exclusively on distinct 'acts'.

In the 'act-based' approach, the attempt to bring rigor and statistical precision relies almost exclusively on the use of lists of items intended to measure conflict, violence and other forms of abuse. These lists are then translated into scales and scale scores are then used to assess individuals as 'violent' or 'non-violent'. Finally, the scores may be used to estimate the proportion of violent men and women in the specific study and to generalize to the wider population. The most widely used and widely criticized example of such a list is the Conflict Tactic Scales (CTS) (Straus 1980; Straus and Gelles 1990).

For scientific purposes, lists or scales intended to assess social problems must be valid and reliable, and the CTS has been shown to have a certain degree of reliability (Archer 1999). However, critics have been particularly concerned about its external or theoretical validity (Szinovacz 1983; Browning and Dutton 1986; Margolin 1987; Dobash *et al.* 1992; Kurz 1993; Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh and Lewis 1998). Critics note that the meaning of certain 'acts' in the CTS is highly variable and the outcome of specific 'acts' is almost impossible to discern from the 'act' itself. For example, in one version of the CTS, men and women were asked whether they had ever 'thrown an object at your partner' or 'hit or tried to hit your partner with something' (Moffitt *et al.* 1997: 51). It can readily be seen that throwing a lamp at a partner is very different from throwing a pillow, and that actually hitting a partner is very different from 'trying to hit' a partner. Importantly, the exact nature and consequences of any 'act' cannot be assessed solely through the knowledge that it occurred. Yet, the 'act-based' approach must invariably equate the physical impact/consequences of a 'slap' delivered by a slight, 5 ft 4 inch woman with the 'slap' of a heavily built man of 6 ft 2 inches. In addition, motivations and intentions cannot be assumed from the 'act'; instead, they must be assessed directly. For example, a woman may 'try to hit' her partner in the context of his holding her at arms length after he has inflicted a serious punch to her face. Her intentions may be self-defence, retaliation or something else.

A narrow 'act-based' approach makes it nearly impossible to consider the context, wider consequences and intentions associated with violent acts or the meanings and consequences of such acts for victims and for perpetrators. It could be argued that it is not necessary to understand the context of the violent acts of men and of women in order to compare the prevalence of each. However, the entire edifice of the FV approach to comparing the violent 'acts' of men with those of women is built on the assumptions that the 'acts' of men and women are equivalent and that the context in which they occur and their meaning for the victim and the perpetrator are not relevant. We shall return to these issues when reporting the findings about women's violence.

An additional problem with 'act-based' measures is that the usual scoring methods are such that it is only necessary for a man or a woman to indicate that they have committed *one single 'act'* on the list in order to be defined as 'violent'. This means that those who have perpetrated *several violent 'acts'* (no matter how serious) and those who have reported committing only one act (no matter how trivial) are both defined as 'violent'. This approach also treats very different acts in a similar manner. For example, the woman who admits that she 'tried to hit her partner' is equated with the man who reports 'beating up' his partner—both have perpetrated an act of violence against their intimate partner. Using the conventional scoring method, both the man and the woman are deemed to be violent; thus, it is concluded that there is 'symmetry' in the perpetration of violence by the woman and the man; both behaved in a similar fashion; both are defined as 'violent'. One outcome of this approach is the reporting of extremely high levels of violence and abuse. For example, using this method, a study conducted in a small New Zealand city found that 75 per cent of the 'couples' reported at least one such act, with a mean score of 2.0 acts of physical abuse perpetrated by men and a slightly higher score of 2.1 acts of violence perpetrated by women (Moffitt *et al.* 2001: 13).

It seems reasonable to ask if this approach distorts the reality of intimate partner violence and/or if the consumers of such findings bring to the reading an understanding of 'violence' that is somehow at variance with the 'acts' involved in the scores reported for men and those for women. The number of acts perpetrated may be similar for men and women, but are the acts themselves also similar? For example, if the authors were to provide greater specification of the *nature* of the 'acts' composing the scores for men and those for women, might they look different in *character* even though they remain similar in number? That is, we might find that the average woman perpetrated 2.1 acts of physical abuse composed of one slap to the face and one punch to the arm and the average man perpetrated 2.0 acts of physical abuse involving one punch to the face and one kick to the stomach. While the number of 'acts' may be similar, their nature (not to mention possible consequences) is vastly different. Based on the number of 'acts', a conclusion of 'symmetry' might be made, but clear specification of the nature of such acts would lead to a conclusion of 'asymmetry'.

Similar definitional problems occur when researchers attempt to investigate other behaviours that are defined as 'abuse', e.g. when a list of discrete acts defined as 'psychological' or 'emotional abuse' is used to assess the 'victimization' of men and women. As with the assessment of 'violence', the term 'abuse' occurs in an abstracted and generalized fashion, making it impossible to know whether the perpetrator and/or the 'victim' considered such acts as abusive. This is a serious problem. For example, one item on a 'psychological abuse' scale is 'made threats to leave'. Using this scale, it was reported that 44.3 per cent of women and 35.9 per cent of men made 'threats to

leave' and, as such, were defined as having 'abused' their partner in this way (Moffitt *et al.* 1997: 51). We suggest that it may be impossible to define such an act as 'abusive' and that it would certainly not be possible to do so without knowledge of the context in which it occurs. Women who experience frequent violence from an intimate partner often 'threaten to leave'. Does this constitute the woman's abuse of her violent male partner? It seems reasonable to ask how this act can be defined as 'abusive'.

Another problem is the conflation of 'violence' (physical and sexual acts) with other non-violent acts of 'abuse' (shouting, name calling, etc.). The conflation problem occurs at several stages: when defining the phenomenon to be studied, when measuring 'acts' and when reporting the findings. The two things are collapsed into a single category, variously called 'violence' or 'abuse', and these terms are often used interchangeably, even after the author may have introduced them separately. A common problem is to introduce the single topic of 'violence', discuss the two issues of 'violence' (slapping, punching) and 'abuse' (threatening to leave, name-calling, etc.) and then report the combined findings under a single label of 'violence' or 'abuse'. This problem occurs in both the FV approach and the VAW approach (e.g. Dekeserady 2000) and can lead to confusion and/or to misleading findings. For example, researchers may conclude that women are just as violent as men when what may, in fact, be under discussion is men's 'acts' of physical and sexual violence and women's 'acts' of arguing or shouting.

This is not to claim that women never engage in acts of physical violence, but here the problem is one of conflating verbal 'acts' with 'physical/sexual acts' and referring to all of them as 'violence'. In other words, the problem is one of definitions about what 'counts' as violence—'physical/sexual acts' and/or 'verbal acts'—at the point when the data are collected and then at the point at which the findings are reported. At the first point of data collection or measurement, the information gathered may in fact be about a variety of physical and sexual 'acts', as well as various verbal 'acts' but, at the final point of presenting findings, all of these differences are collapsed into one category or concept of 'violence', 'abuse' or 'aggression'. This is also not to imply that non-violent acts of 'abuse' are not problematic or consequential but, rather, that these acts and their consequences should be clearly differentiated, examined and reported in their own right.

Conceptualizing Violence and Abuse

Within both the FV and VAW approaches, researchers sometimes fail to articulate the complex nature of intimate partner violence as they build their concepts and the tools used to measure it. Many of the 'act-based' approaches are so highly operational that the specification of what counts as intimate partner abuse and/or violence is restricted simply to the lists of acts used to gather data. Theoretical definitions and concepts play almost no role in the approach in which 'violence' is no more or less than what is measured using the list of 'acts'. Even when issues beyond the 'acts', such as the intent to do harm, are included in the definition of 'violence', these are rarely if ever measured (Gelles and Straus 1979; Gelles 2000: 785–6).² Such an operationalist approach to the meaning of concepts has a long history in the physical and social sciences, although its

² In the Canadian Violence Against Women Study, Johnson added the notion of 'intention to do harm' to several of the items on the modified CTS (Johnson and Sacco 1995).

serious limitations have been exposed from the outset (Bridgman 1927; Lundberg 1942; Adler 1947). In order to generate more adequate explanatory accounts, concepts need to be embedded in explicit theoretical frameworks. In so doing, definitions and the meaning of concepts such as 'violence' and 'abuse' are made more explicit. In short, in order to research any social issue and the policies and interventions associated with it, it is necessary adequately to define and specify the problem itself.

Social scientists and philosophers have long suggested that an understanding of the social world would advance through a careful consideration of the role of concepts and their development in social research. Lazarsfeld (1967) suggested several stages in the development of concepts: articulate an initial imagery of the concept; specify the 'dimensions' associated with the concept and divide it into its constituent parts; translate the various parts into observable indicators that can be measured empirically; and combine the empirical indicators into indices or scale scores. Through this process, researchers can specify the significant properties of the phenomenon to be studied. Lazarsfeld also suggested that researchers should begin with 'real life situations'—not abstract, artificial experiments—and that concepts must be nested within an overarching theoretical framework in order to be meaningful for empirical research: 'In scientific inquiry, concept formation and theory formation must go hand in hand' (Hempel 1966: 97). A purely 'act-based' approach to the study of intimate partner violence pays scant attention to the initial steps in the process of concept formation, rarely offering characterizations or definitions that specify the constituent elements of 'violence' and/or 'abuse', and rarely locating these terms in an explanatory framework. Because the 'acts-based' approach is highly operational, the 'acts' that are measured are stripped of theoretical and social meanings and, as such, provide an inadequate basis for describing or explaining the violent acts of men and women.

Claims of 'symmetry' in the perpetration of violence by women and men, and of 'equivalence' of the violence itself, rest almost solely on the operational procedures associated with the 'act-based' approach. On the other hand, 'asymmetry' in the perpetration of violence by men and women, and 'non-equivalence' in the violence itself, emerge from research using a concept specific (Dobash and Dobash 1983) approach to definitions, concepts and measurement of violence. Let us consider the puzzle of 'symmetry' and 'equivalence' by focusing primarily on the violence of women against an intimate male partner. We begin by considering the importance of studying couples, and then proceed to our own study.

Intimate Partner Violence: Studies of Couples

When attempting to study men's and women's accounts of 'shared' experiences, it is useful to study those who have shared such experiences. An important method of investigating the potentially conflicting accounts of intimate partner violence is to compare the reports of couples—accounts of victims and perpetrators, i.e. parties to the same events. There is a long history of studying couples in order to consider the lives that men and women lead within intimate relationships and families, and to reflect on the different ways in which they report and evaluate their 'common' experiences. The focus has often been on household tasks and attitudes and the findings often show divergence between men and women about some of the most common aspects of the world they occupy together (for a review, see Szinovacz 1983). One might expect to find even more divergence between the accounts of men and women about the far more contentious issue of violence.

Research using couples generally shows that men and women often disagree about the occurrence of violence in relationships (see, e.g. Szinovacz 1983; Jouriles and O'Leary 1985; Browning and Dutton 1986; Edleson and Brygger 1986; Margolin 1987; Cantos, Nazroo 1995; Moffitt *et al.* 1997; Dobash *et al.* 1998; Archer 1999; Schafer, Caetano and Clarke 2002). So how do we understand these differences? More expansive information about the context of violent 'events' and their meanings to those involved help make sense of the differences between men's and women's accounts and move toward a fuller understanding of the dynamics of such events and relationships.

In an extensive review of the literature, Margolin (1987) concluded that there was little overall agreement between couples about men's and women's violence, and that women are more likely than men to acknowledge their own violence. Women were also more likely to experience considerably more violence and women's initiation of violence was often appropriately defined as 'protective reactive' responses—a term initially used by Gelles (1997). She noted that 'Spouses may have different definitions and thresholds as to what they view as violent, may ascribe self-serving labels and interpretations to behaviours, or, simply falsify reports' (Margolin 1987: 77). One significant finding of Margolin's own research was that it was impossible to make sense of her results without a consideration of the meanings attached to the violence of men and women. She noted that, 'While CTS items appear behaviourally specific, their meanings are open to question' (Margolin 1987: 82). As an example of this problem, she cites a couple that reported kicking each other—clearly an act of violence—yet, in her subsequent in-depth interviews, she discovered that this was a playful activity that they engaged in when in bed. She concluded that assessments of violence should include a consideration of the severity of injuries, the perceptions of the victims and the intentions of the attackers: 'A woman's hardest punches, which might be laughed at by her husband, would count as "husband abuse" based on actions alone' (Margolin 1987: 83).

A study of intimate partner violence reported by couples

In order to consider the claims of equivalence in the perpetration of violence by men and by women, we present findings from in-depth interviews with couples that were part of a larger study of criminal justice intervention in intimate partner violence (Dobash *et al.* 2000). The wider study included a sample of 122 men and 134 women, drawn from cases dealt with in two different courts. The sample used here is based on 190 interviews with 95 men and 95 women.³ In-depth interviews were conducted separately with men and women. A context-specific method was used⁴ and both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. While men's violence was the main focus of the study, women's violence and aggression were also examined. Using the quantitative and qualitative data from the interviews, we examined the prevalence and incidents of men's violence and women's violence, the detailed nature of the physical and sexual acts involved, and of the injuries inflicted. Focusing on women's violence, we consider the nature of women's violence, of men's reactions and the issue of self-defence. Little is known

³ Studies of couples where violence is involved usually have relatively small samples because of issues of access, cooperation of both parties, safety and the like; they range in size from 30 to 360 (Browning and Dutton 1986; Cantos *et al.* 1994; Jouriles and O'Leary 1985; Margolin 1987; Moffitt *et al.* 2001; Nazroo 1995; Szinovacz 1983).

⁴ For further delineation of the context-specific approach, see Dobash and Dobash 1979; 1983; Dobash *et al.* 2000.

about the specific nature and context of women's violence and yet this is essential if the claim of equivalence between men and women is to be assessed.

All the men in the study had been convicted of an act involving violence against their partner and, as such, constitute a criminal justice sample of male perpetrators. Some researchers argue that individuals involved with criminal justice may be reluctant to discuss their 'illegal' acts; we did not find this. It may be that once such acts have been made public, men and women partners are able to discuss them with a researcher, provided they receive the usual guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity. Certainly, offenders may be reticent to report violent criminal acts if reporting rules require researchers and professionals to report heretofore undisclosed criminal acts (this usually occurs in cases of physical and/or sexual violence against children). This was not the case in the jurisdictions included in this study and we had no such problems. It should be noted that while the focus of this paper is on women's violence to a male partner, the sample is drawn from men who have used violence against a woman partner. As such, women's violence is being examined in the context of men's violence. While it might be useful to study only women who have been arrested for using non-lethal violence against a male partner, this is such a rare occurrence that it would be difficult to obtain an adequate sample.⁵ As such, women's violence within the context of a sample of male abusers may be the most realistic approach to sampling, given that the focus is on violent behaviour and not domestic conflicts, disagreements, arguments, name calling and the sort of 'aggressive' behaviour often measured using the CTS and, in turn, defined as violence. As with all samples, this one has its limitations, but this sample has allowed us to open a window on the existing body of knowledge by providing intensive and extensive knowledge about intimate partner violence from both men and women partners, who discussed at length and in great detail their own violence and that of their partner.

In using only couples, we focus on violent events where both parties were present. The main concern is to consider men's accounts and women's accounts of violent 'acts', 'events', injuries and consequences, as well as their contexts, meanings and interpretations.⁶ Both quantitative and qualitative results are presented. 'Violence' is conceptualized as malevolent physical or sexual 'acts', used in a purposive manner and intended to inflict physical and/or psychological harm. Such acts usually, although not always, have harmful consequences for the victim, particularly physical injuries. In addition, the wider 'constellation of abuse' includes acts that are not physical per se but are meant to frighten, intimidate and coerce. Intimidating and coercive 'acts' are measured and/or assessed separately and reported separately from physical/sexual 'acts', in order that they are not conflated. It should be stressed that coercive and intimidating acts may have important and negative consequences for victims but, as discussed earlier, it is important that they are not collapsed into one category and referred to as though there is no difference between them.

⁵ Of the 933 court cases of 'domestic violence' from which the present sample was drawn, there were only three cases of women charged with using violence against a male partner.

⁶ When reporting findings from couples, it is important to disaggregate the reports of men from those of women. In their sample of 360 young couples, Moffitt *et al.* (2001: 13, 20) identified and reported upon 28 couples whom they defined as 'clinical', i.e. reached levels of partner abuse that 'resulted in injury (sprains, bruises, cuts, knocked-out, loss of consciousness, broken bones, loose teeth), medical treatment, and police and/or court conviction'. The findings are presented in such a way that it is impossible to know who (man or woman) required medical treatment, sought refuge or was arrested or convicted. This information is essential in order to assess the nature and consequences of violence perpetrated by men and by women within these relationships.

*Men's and Women's Perpetration of Violence and Injuries to an Intimate Partner**Violent events: couples' reports of men's violence*

The couples were asked how often the man had been violent to the woman during the previous year. It was difficult for respondents to give a precise number of *violent events*, particularly if there had been many such events. As such, respondents were asked to indicate how many events occurred in a usual month and this was used to arrive at an annual estimate. As shown in Table 1, men generally reported perpetrating significantly fewer violent events against their woman partner than were reported by the women themselves. Of the sample, no direct physical violence was reported in the interviews by 21.1 per cent of women and 30.5 per cent of men.⁷ Of those reporting violence in the interviews, 47.4 per cent of women and 55.8 per cent of men reported one to four violent events, 17.9 per cent of women and 9.5 per cent of men reported five to nine violent events, and 13.7 per cent of women and 4.2 per cent of men reported ten or more incidents of violence perpetrated by the man.

Couples' reports of women's violence

The couples were also asked how often the woman had been violent to the man during the year prior to the interview (Table 1). Most had little difficulty in giving a precise number of violent events, because the number of incidents perpetrated by women against men was usually few or none. Just under half of the men and women agreed that there had been *no* physical violence perpetrated by the woman against the man (46.3 per cent of women and 40.0 per cent of men reported *NO* violence by the woman). Of those reporting violence by the woman: 44.2 per cent of women and 50.6 per cent of men reported one to four events; 4.2 per cent of women and 7.4 per cent of men reported five to nine events; and 5.3 per cent of women and 2.1 per cent of men reported ten or more events perpetrated by the woman.

TABLE 1 *Men's and women's reports of violent incidents against their partner*

| | Men's violence to women*** | | Women's violence to men (ns) | |
|-------------|----------------------------|---------|------------------------------|---------|
| | Men % | Women % | Men % | Women % |
| No violence | 30.5 | 21.1 | 40.0 | 46.3 |
| 1-4 events | 55.8 | 47.4 | 50.6 | 44.2 |
| 5-9 events | 9.5 | 17.9 | 7.4 | 4.2 |
| 10+ events | 4.2 | 13.7 | 2.1 | 5.3 |

Note: asterisks identify statistically significant chi-square results.

n = 95 couples.

*, p < 0.05; **, p < 0.01; ***, p < 0.001.

⁷ All the men had been arrested for an offence that involved an incident of violence against the woman or damage of domestic property in the context of domestic conflict. Of the entire sample, 80% of the men were arrested and convicted for assault and 20% were convicted of offences involving breach of the peace, damage to property and threatening behaviour.

Frequent violence: five or more violent events within one year

A comparison of the general pattern of men's and women's reporting of the violence perpetrated by each provides some striking differences (Table 1). First, there is significant discordance between men's and women's reports of men's violence. Of particular note is the discrepancy in the reports of 'frequent' violence during a one-year period (combining the two categories of five to nine and ten or more incidents in Table 1). About one-third (31.6 per cent) of the women reported five or more incidents perpetrated by their male partner, while only 13.7 per cent of the men agreed that they had perpetrated this number of incidents. By contrast, men's and women's reports of women's violence were more congruent, including those about violence in general and about 'frequent' violence. Nearly identical proportions of men (9.3 per cent) and women (9.5 per cent) reported that women perpetrated five or more incidents during the one-year period. It should be noted that although the men in this sample had perpetrated a considerable amount of violence in these relationship, just under half of the women (46 per cent) and the men (40 per cent) reported that women had not used violence during the year preceding the interview.

Violent 'acts'

The couples were also asked to specify the different types of violent 'acts' that made up the physical or sexual violence within these 'events'. Both men and women reported a much wider range of violent physical and sexual 'acts' committed by men against women than vice versa. For the purposes of comparing men's violence and women's violence, we include only those physical 'acts' committed by both men and women. While this allows for direct comparisons of men's and women's violence, it omits some of the 'high-end' violence that was perpetrated only by men against women, including sexual assault. We include ten comparisons of physical 'acts' perpetrated by men and women against their partner.

Several general patterns can be seen in Table 2. First, whether reported by men or by women and whether the differences between them are great or small, many more men perpetrate every type of violent or threatening 'acts' than do women. Secondly, sometimes a larger percentage of women than men report their own violence (e.g. slap, push-shove and kick body), while men never report more of their own violence than is reported by their female partners. Thirdly, some 'acts' are perpetrated by a large percentage of men but are rarely perpetrated by women (e.g. choke, damage property and threaten to hit). Fourthly, men and women tend to agree more about women's violence than about men's violence. The rarity of women's 'threats to hit' men would seem to be indicative of an absence of the overall 'constellation of abuse' so familiar in men's abusive behaviour.

While not shown in Table 2, many men perpetrated these 'acts' on a *frequent* basis; women did not do so (Dobash *et al.* 2000). In addition to the 'acts' listed in Table 2, as noted above, other 'acts' have not been included here because both men and women agree that while men perpetrated such acts, they were never perpetrated by women (e.g. forced sex, kick face, etc.). For example, about 40 per cent of women reported that their male partner had 'demanded sex' from them and nearly 20 per cent indicated that their partner had 'forced' them to have sex on at least one occasion. By comparison, far fewer men reported having committed such acts against their woman

TABLE 2 *Intimate partner violence: a comparison of couples' reports of violent or threatening 'acts' perpetrated by men against women and women against men*

| 'Acts' | Men's violence to women | | Women's violence to men | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| | Men's reports % | Women's reports % | Men's reports % | Women's reports % |
| Damage property | 80.0 | 87.4 (ns) | 4.2 | 1.1 (ns) |
| Threaten to hit | 69.5 | 84.2 (ns) | 5.3 | 3.2 (ns) |
| Throw something to 'hit' | 68.4 | 81.1* | 26.3 | 25.3 (ns) |
| Push-shove | 94.7 | 96.8 (ns) | 10.5 | 20.0 (ns)^ |
| Slap | 82.1 | 88.4 (ns) | 20.0 | 29.5 (ns)^ |
| Scratch | 62.1 | 76.8 (ns) | 16.8 | 10.5 (ns) |
| Punch | 68.4 | 88.4* | 31.6 | 31.6 (ns) |
| Kick body | 54.7 | 78.9*** | 17.9 | 23.2 (ns)^ |
| Use object as weapon | 37.9 | 60.0** | 16.8 | 15.8 (ns) |
| Choke | 48.4 | 66.3*** | 1.1 | 1.1 (ns) |

Note: asterisks identify statistically significant chi-square results.

^, a higher proportion of self-reports than partner's reports.

n=95 couples.

*, p<0.05; **, p<0.01; ***, p<0.001.

partner, with about 15 per cent saying that they had 'demanded sex' and about 3 per cent saying that they had 'forced sex' on their woman partner. None of the men or women in the study reported sexual coercion or violence perpetrated by women.

Couples' reports of injuries inflicted by men and women on partners

Several general patterns about injuries can be seen in Table 3 that show both concordance and discordance in the reports of men and women. First, regardless of who is reporting, it can be seen that many more men inflict every type of injury against women than do women against men. Secondly, some injuries are inflicted by a fair percentage of men but by very few women (e.g. split lip, fractured teeth/bones, black-out/unconscious). Thirdly, a considerable percentage of men and of women

TABLE 3 *A comparison of couples' reports of injuries inflicted by men against women partners and by women against male partners*

| Injuries | Men's injuries to women | | Women's injuries to men | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| | Men's reports % | Women's reports % | Men's reports % | Women's reports % |
| Bruise | 87.4 | 96.8 (ns) | 12.6 | 13.7 (ns)^ |
| Black eye | 57.9 | 76.8** | 9.5 | 4.2 (ns) |
| Cut body | 18.9 | 45.3*** | 11.6 | 8.4 (ns) |
| Cut/scratch face | 36.8 | 53.7*** | 26.3 | 27.4 (ns)^ |
| Split lip | 31.6 | 61.1*** | 3.2 | 2.1 (ns) |
| Fracture teeth/bones | 21.1 | 42.1*** | 5.3 | 1.1 (ns) |
| Black-out/unconscious | 13.7 | 33.7*** | 2.1 | 1.1 (ns) |

Note: asterisks identify statistically significant chi-square results.

^, a higher proportion of self-reports than partner's reports.

n=95 couples.

*, p<0.05; **, p<0.01; ***, p<0.001.

report that men inflict bruises and black eyes on women but both report that women rarely do the same to men. Overall, the couples agree that the *injuries inflicted by women upon men* are less frequent and less severe. By contrast, the couples disagree about the *injuries inflicted by men upon women*, with men reporting less of their own violence to their partner, while women report more of men's violence. In short, men and women tend to agree about the low level of injuries inflicted by women upon men but differ about the frequency and severity of injuries inflicted by men upon women.

In addition to the injuries shown in Table 3, others have not been included because they were only inflicted by men upon women but not the obverse (e.g. miscarriage, 5 per cent; vomiting, 57 per cent). As reported elsewhere, these data also show that while many men inflicted injuries on a frequent basis, women rarely did so (Dobash *et al.* 2000: 188–9). The greater levels of agreement between men and women about injuries inflicted by women may be because women commit far less violence and inflict far fewer injuries and, as such, each event and each injury may be more memorable to both parties.

Perceived seriousness of men's and women's violence

Women and men were also asked about their perceptions of the seriousness of their partner's violence to them. As shown in Table 4, the overall pattern is one in which men and women generally agree that *men's violence* is 'serious' or 'very serious' and that *women's violence* is 'not serious' or 'slightly serious'. The vast majority of both women (82.0 per cent) and men (66.1 per cent) describe men's violence as either 'serious' or 'very serious', whereas only 36.0 per cent of women and 28.5 per cent of men describe women's violence similarly.

Contextualizing Women's Violence against Male Partners

Evidence from this study provides information about the prevalence of violence and injuries among couples and the perceived seriousness of men's and women's violence.

TABLE 4 *A comparison of couples' reports of the seriousness of violence by men against women and women against men*

| Seriousness | Men's violence to woman partner* | | Women's violence to male partner (ns) | |
|------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Men's reports (n = 92) % | Women's reports (n = 92) % | Men's reports (n = 56) % | Women's reports (n = 50) % |
| Not serious | 10.5 | 5.0 | 55.4 | 40.0 |
| Slightly serious | 23.4 | 13.0 | 16.1 | 24.0 [^] |
| Serious | 38.4 | 36.0 | 23.2 | 32.0 [^] |
| Very serious | 27.7 | 46.0 | 5.3 | 4.0 |
| | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Note: asterisks identify statistically significant chi-square results.

The ns vary because, in many of the relationships, there was no violence by the woman.

[^], a higher proportion of self-reports than partner's reports.

*, p < 0.05; **, p < 0.01; ***, p < 0.001.

While the main pattern is one of men's violence to women, nonetheless the evidence suggests that some women do commit violence against male partners. Here, we examine women's violence by considering more fully its nature, context and consequences, as well as how men and women view women's violence. In order to do this, we use qualitative evidence from the in-depth interviews, which were tape-recorded and analysed using QSR Nud.ist software. The qualitative findings presented below corroborate the quantitative findings presented above. The qualitative findings reveal the nature of the differences between men's and women's violence and provide insight into the meanings each attaches to it.

Nature of women's violence

The findings presented in Tables 1–4 suggest that while women do not generally use serious, consequential violence or perpetrate violence on a frequent basis, men and women report that a few women do use serious violence against their male partner. During the lengthy interviews in which violent events were discussed in detail, women were usually more willing to speak at length about their own violence than were men. The following comments illustrate this violence.

How serious would you say your violence was? Well I suppose the fact that I stabbed him made it pretty serious. I was arrested for attempted murder but, I mean, he gets arrested for a 'domestic' and I get arrested for 'attempted murder'. It was dropped to 'assault', right enough, and I got eighteen months probation. (woman.1082)

That time he had cracked my cheekbone, I went for him with a knife. After he done it [abused her], I just went for him. (woman.1160)

Reports of *serious* violence by women were not the norm, as shown in the reports of injuries in Table 3 and the evaluation of seriousness in Table 4. Accordingly, the majority of men's and women's reports show a restricted range of 'acts' and types of injuries perpetrated by women, as revealed in the comments of both men and women.

Have you ever been violent to him? Oh, I've kind of thrown things, and things like that, but no punching and kicking or that kind of thing. (woman.1041)

Well, apart from throwing that cup, which I don't see as being violent because I got it worse that time. (woman.1064)

How many times has [she] been violent to you? Four or five times. *What usually leads up to this?* An argument over something or other and [she] lashes out but, as I say, she throws—it could be just a wet cloth or she'll punch me in the chest or something like that or hit me with the strap of her handbag but it's never, very rarely, sore. *Have you ever had any injuries?* Except for her scratching me, that's the only real injury I've had. She's never bruised me. (man.056)

Does she ever resort to violence? Yes. *What would she do?* Throw a cup, break the hi-fi. (man.055)

Men's reactions to women's violence against them

Men and women reacted very differently to the violence they experienced. In order to understand better men's reactions to women's violence, it is important to set them in

the context of women's reactions to men's violence. The 95 women indicated that they reacted to the violence perpetrated against them in ways that illustrate the impact and importance of these events in their lives. Here, we report only a few. Most women said they were usually 'frightened' (79 per cent), felt 'helpless' (60 per cent), 'alone' (65 per cent) and 'trapped' (57 per cent). They felt 'abused' (65 per cent) but were also 'bitter' (82 per cent) and 'angry' (80 per cent).

Men's reactions to women's violence against them usually did not reflect the negative consequences similar to those reported by women. Of the men who described their response to the violence of their woman partner, the largest proportion said they were 'not bothered' (26 per cent), followed by those who felt that the woman was 'justified' (20 per cent) and those who 'ridiculed her' (17 per cent) or were 'impressed' (3 per cent) that she had managed to respond. Others felt 'angry' (14 per cent) or 'surprised' (6 per cent) and there were a variety of 'other' reactions (8 per cent). Only a few of the men felt 'victimized' (6 per cent).

Men often described women's violence toward them as insignificant:

Has her violence toward you been serious? No, never. *Not at all?* No. (man.123)

Do you feel concerned about her violent behaviour? No, not really. (man.116)

Men sometimes viewed women's violent/aggressive acts as comical or ludicrous.

Like we've had an argument and I've had the clothes flung at me and a cup smashed over my head. You know, she does that to me and I end up laughing and it makes her worse. (man.036)

Who hit first? Me likely. *And what did you think about her being violent to you?* I just laughed, probably laughing and joking about it. *She trying to hit me? Like, trying to hurt me?* [incredulous] (man.058)

What would you do or say [when she hit you]? If she hit us, I would say, 'is that the best you can do?' She'd hit me again and I'd say something like, 'Oh [Betty], for God's sake, just pack it in'. *So, you'd make fun of her?* I would just laugh at her, you know, just laugh at her [saying] 'you're mental!' (man.055)

And what would you do [when he hit you]? I don't know, probably try to hit him. *How serious would you be?* Very serious. *Does he take it seriously?* Most times he just laughs at me and that makes it worse. (woman.1055)

Some men found it impossible to contemplate women's violence. It was only men who could and should use violence, not women.

What do you think about her being violent to you? Well, I think she's not got the right to do that. I'm a man, she's a woman! (man.008)

He says it's degrading to him to have a woman lift her hand to him. (woman.1082)

Has [she] ever been violent to you? No, because she's a woman, I'm a man. Basically, my wife's 98lbs. (man.041)

A few men even expressed a form of 'admiration' of the woman's violent reaction to their abuse. For them, the violence seemed to be the only meaningful expression of her objections to his violence toward her. While women repeatedly expressed their rejection of and anger about his violence to her, for some men these actions were 'invisible' or inconsequential. Women may have reacted in these ways for many years; it was only

when she acted 'like a man' that he appeared to notice her objections. Ironically, the woman's response to the man's repeated abuse might serve to expurgate his guilt.

How do you feel about the violence? Good. *How's that?* The fact that she's getting her aggression back out on me what I used to do to her. (man.038)

It did me good. I was quite pleased she did it because I knew she was starting to stand up for herself. (man.089)

Both the quantitative and qualitative evidence suggest that men's reactions to and interpretations of the violence they experienced differ from those expressed by women about men's violence. The fear, bewilderment and helplessness expressed by the women were not apparent in the responses of the men. Unlike the women, few of the men reacted to the violence in ways that suggested it had seriously affected their sense of well-being or the routines of their daily life. Rather, in those relationships in which women's violence occurred, men were often unconcerned and viewed it as relatively inconsequential and of no lasting effect. Although a few men were affected in a negative fashion and did experience serious injuries, this was not the norm for most of the men in the study.

Self-Defence

The issue of self-defence in intimate partner violence has been a subject of considerable debate. As recognized in law, the concept of self-defence and its corollary, provocation, incorporate contextual and situational elements (Polk 1997). In order to define an act as 'self-defence', it is necessary to consider the context in which the 'act' occurred, including the interaction between the individuals involved. These elements are essential in the application of the term 'self-defence'. It is inappropriate, as has been done in some research, to infer 'self-defence' or lack thereof from simple, static information, such as the 'personal characteristics' of the individuals involved and/or who acted first (Moffitt *et al.* 2001: 25; Stets and Strauss 1990: 161).

In this study, men and women were asked about the use of violence in 'self-defence'. The responses are highly gendered and illustrate the complexity of this issue. Men generally did not use the term 'self-defence' to describe their violence toward women. When discussing the violent event that led to their arrest and conviction, only six of the 95 men indicated that they hit their partner because 'she hit him first', but even they did not describe this as 'self-defence'. By contrast, women often used the term 'self-defence' or 'self-protection' to describe their violence to men.

Men and women were asked whether women's use of violence was 'always' in self-defence. Focusing only on responses from individuals where women had used violence, 75 per cent of these women said their violence was 'always' in self-defence and 54 per cent of men agreed. The different terms used by respondents to describe what might be seen as 'reactions' in response to particular 'acts' of violence (e.g. raise an arm to deflect a blow, push against the chest in order to facilitate running from the room to escape further blows, etc.) raise questions about how such acts might be defined by the men and women involved, as well as by researchers. Are these acts of 'self-protection' and/or 'self-defence', or acts of 'violence'? Acts of 'self-protection' might include such

things as ‘putting one’s arms up to deflect an oncoming blow’, while an act of ‘self-defence’ might include the ‘return of a blow’. Surely, these are not acts of malevolent violence. This is a complex issue, as reflected in some of the comments made by men and women about women’s violence.

Was she ever violent when you were arguing? No, not really. She would usually try and protect herself. (man.089)

What did you usually try to do? I tried to hold my hands up. *To protect yourself?* Yes, and when he used to punch me, I used to try and grab his hands or just hold his hands, and he’d be kicking me. He would just come up and kick me but I would try to put out my hand to stop him from kicking me. I was trying to defend myself really, which I never done before. (woman.1064)

Did [she] ever try to stop you being violent to her? She’d pick up something, like a glass for instance and warn me. She’s kicked me out of the house and I couldn’t get back in because of the [my] violence. (man.041)

These quotes demonstrate some of the complications of this issue. In the literature, it is often implied that women’s reactions to men’s violence do not include elements of retaliation and/or revenge. In this study, it was clear that women did at times respond to their abusive male partner out of ‘reactive anger’ about a specific attack against her or as a result of the cumulative effect of many attacks over a prolonged period of abuse.

Have you ever been violent to him? Only sort of in self-defence. *So you have retaliated if you have been hurt?* Yes. *Have you ever hurt him in any way or has he been bruised as a result of what you have done?* The first time it happened, I picked up a shoe and smacked him across the face with it and his nose went a bit ‘squiff’ for a while, but then things went back to normal [him hitting her]. (woman.1081)

He’s hurt me a good few times but I’ve always been able to fight back, except for the last time. One night I told him if he didn’t stop hitting me I’d pick something up and hit him with it, and I did. I picked up an empty juice bottle and hit him with it. But it was the only way I could get him to stop. And he was going to get me charged for hitting him . . . and I said to the policeman ‘Oh, that’s fine, go ahead, charge me. But what about what he’s done to me? That doesn’t matter because I defended myself?’ And the policeman, said, ‘Right, we’ll separate you for the night’. (woman.1066)

Women’s use of violence, whether in self-protection, self-defence or retaliation, sometimes resulted in an escalation of the man’s violence toward her.

Have you ever been violent to him? A couple of times I’ve sort of slapped him back, but I mean I don’t get anywhere so I didn’t bother. *When you’ve slapped him back, how did he respond?* I get it all the more, that’s why I don’t bother. (woman.1126)

Did that [trying to protect yourself] reduce it [the violence]? No, it didn’t reduce it. It made things a bit worse actually because it made him hit harder just in case I tried to hit back. If he was going to hurt me, he made sure that it was bad enough that I wouldn’t be able to get up. I mean, there’s not much I can do with broken fingers or there’s not much you can do when you’re being stoated [bounced] off a wall. (woman.1064)

How did he respond to your violence? I think the fact that I tried defending myself made him ten times worse. (woman.1066)

Conclusions and Implications for Legislation, Policies and Interventions

We began with a 'puzzle' about contradictory research findings concerning the violence of men and women against an intimate partner. Research findings are contradictory, suggesting, on the one hand, *symmetry*, with men and women equally likely to perpetrate violence against an intimate partner, and, on the other hand, *asymmetry*, with men the primary perpetrators of violence against women partners. These contradictory research findings not only have implications for academic research but also for policies and interventions. This adds importance to the task of trying to unravel the puzzle of how researchers arrived at such contradictory findings. In order to do this, we considered how this 'violence' is conceptualized, defined, measured and reported. We suggest that FV research that uses a narrow, 'act-based' approach to the definition and measurement of violence is more likely to find 'symmetry' or equivalence of 'violence' between men and women. This is because it conflates acts of violence and aggression and does not examine the context, consequences, motivations, intentions and reactions associated with the overall violent 'event' or the relationships in which the violence occurs. The more comprehensive methodology used in VAW research provides additional data about the problem, including a more detailed look at the violence itself, as well as inclusion of factors such as context, consequences and intentions. This approach provides a wider base of relevant knowledge about the violence and illustrates important differences between men and women in the perpetration of violence, as well as its consequences. Findings from this more comprehensive methodology support the notion that *serious* intimate partner violence is asymmetrical, with men usually violent to women.

In those cases where women had used violence against their male partner, the findings reported here suggest that women's violence differs from that perpetrated by men in terms of nature, frequency, intention, intensity, physical injury and emotional impact. All of the women in this study had been the victims of repeated physical violence from their male partner, often over many years. Despite this, just over half had used any form of violence against their abuser, none had used sexual violence and only a few had used serious or injurious violence. Of the women who had used violence, the consequences in terms of emotional impact were usually inconsequential; the consequences in terms of injuries were usually, though not always, less severe; the violence often, though not always, occurred in the context of 'self-defence' or 'self-protection'; and women's violence was usually, although not always, rated by both partners as 'not serious'. In addition, women did not use intimidating or coercive forms of controlling behaviour associated with the 'constellation of abuse'. Men who were the recipients of women's violence usually reported that it was 'inconsequential', did not negatively affect their sense of well-being and safety, and these men rarely, if ever, sought protection from the authorities. These findings regarding the nature and consequences of women's violence make it impossible to construe the violence of men and women as either equivalent or reciprocal.

Men's and women's reports about their own violence and the violence of their partner reveal that they tend to agree about the nature, frequency and impact of the violence perpetrated by women but disagree about men's violence. With respect to women's violence, there is considerable concordance between men and women in reporting that women do not usually perpetrate violence. When women do use violence, men and women agree that it is generally infrequent, is rarely 'serious', results in few, if any, injuries and has few,

if any, negative consequences for men. By contrast, there is considerable discordance between men's and women's reports about men's violence. Men and women disagree about the nature, frequency and impact of violence perpetrated by men—women report more and men report less. Curiously, while men never report more of their own violence than that reported by women partners, women sometimes do. These results correspond to findings from other research (Szinovacz 1983; Margolin 1987).

What are the policy implications of these findings? These findings indicate that the problem of intimate partner violence is primarily one of men's violence to women partners and not the obverse. A recent review of existing policies on domestic violence in England and Wales includes a comprehensive list of 'detailed recommendations on key policy areas' (Harwin 2000). The general principles underlying a national strategy should include: promoting the protection of women and children at risk of violence; prevention through public awareness, education and the law; and the provision of effective services. The 'framework for action' includes a host of specific recommendations across a broad spectrum, including: specialist refuge and advocacy services, civil law, criminal law, law enforcement, divorce and court proceedings, child protection services, social services, welfare benefits and related issues, housing, immigration laws and education (Harwin 2000: 382–91). These efforts are overwhelmingly directed at the problem of men's violence to women.

The findings reported here are in line with this overall orientation to policy. They support the general trend of policies and interventions relating to intimate partner violence that are almost wholly designed to deal with the serious problem of men's violence directed at women (Dobash 2003). While any and all conflict and negative encounters between couples is regrettable, policies and interventions, particularly those of criminal justice, are not developed to provide wide-scale responses to such encounters; nor are public resources spent upon them. This is not to say that conflicts, heated arguments, name-calling or a one-off push or shove are unimportant but, rather, that great care must be taken in the definition and measurement of any such behaviour before it is labelled as 'violence' and before public policies and interventions are directed at it (Gordon 2000: 750).⁸

Even so, what about the perennial question of women's violence to male partners? If such violence occurs with the same frequency and ferocity as men's violence and has a similar impact on the victims, then responding to the needs of male victims should be identical to those for women victims. Accordingly, laws, social services, health care, education and the like would all need to expend similar resources in assisting the equal numbers of male victims of violence to escape to shelters where they might be safe, to obtain protection orders so that they might be safe, and to access public housing for themselves and their children in order that they might be safe. A follow-up study of men who identified themselves as victims of domestic violence in the Scottish Crime Survey 2000 was conducted in order to examine the nature and veracity of these reports and to consider the need for services for such 'abused' men (Gadd, Farrall, Dallimore and Lombard 2002). The findings revealed that one-quarter of the men had not experienced violence from their partner but had misunderstood the meaning of the term 'domestic violence' and were referring, instead, to crimes in the domestic dwelling (e.g. non-domestic assaults

⁸ This is also supported by survey research that shows that respondents do not define as 'violence' minor, infrequent or moderate acts as reported on the CTS (Hamby, Poindexter and Gray-Little 1996).

and property crimes). The follow-up showed that some of the men were also assailants and very few defined themselves as 'victims'. Of those men who did experience some form of violence from their female partner, they were less likely than women to be repeat victims, to have been seriously injured and to report feeling fearful in their own home. Based on these findings, the researchers concluded that there was no need for a special agency or refuge provision for men (Gadd, Farrall, Dallimore and Lombard 2002). In the United States, more women are being brought into the criminal justice system because of 'domestic violence', primarily because of dual arrests of both the man and the woman (Miller 2001). This may suggest the occurrence of violence by both women and men and the need for victim services for both. However, a closer examination of these cases suggested that the majority of the women were rarely the 'primary' perpetrator, were often the victims of violence from their male partner, and that men's and women's need for services were rarely equivalent (Hamberger and Poternte 1994; Miller 2001).

If women's violence is not equivalent to that of men and does not require identical policies and interventions, then how do we conceive of women's violence and what is to be done by way of intervention and prevention? According to the findings of this and other research, when women's violence against a male partner does occur, it is usually, although not always, in the context of men's violence to the woman (Swan and Snow 2002). However, as already stated, this violence is rarely identical or truly reciprocal. The type and level of violence, the nature and number of injuries, the perceived seriousness of the violence and the sense of safety and well-being are not the same for men and women. For the most part, women's violence is reactive and self-protective and is often in self-defence.

As mentioned earlier, it has been suggested that one strategy for reducing intimate partner violence is to propose that women never use violence against a male partner, regardless of the circumstances, because this may result in the escalation of the man's violence against the woman (Straus 1993). It is neither possible nor reasonable to make 'fixed' recommendations about the nature of how any woman should respond to violence against her, because it is impossible to know the relevant circumstances within a given event or relationship. It would be similar to recommending in advance that a woman who is being raped should never 'fight back' or 'always fight back'. Perhaps a more positive strategy for preventing or reducing women's violence, and one in keeping with the findings of this study, is to eliminate men's violence against women partners.

Reductions in the rates of homicide in the United States over the last two decades reflect on several aspects of this issue: women's serious violence, fighting back in the context of violence from the male partner and relevant interventions for the victim and the perpetrator. In the United States, as elsewhere, much of the lethal violence committed by women against men occurs in the context of ongoing physical abuse by the man (Browne 1987; Wilson and Daly 1992). In the United States, there has been a significant reduction in homicides among intimate partners, particularly the killing of African-American men by their women partners. Evidence suggests that this reduction in intimate partner homicides is related to more effective responses to abusers and improved social and legal services for abused women. These provide women with supports and escape routes so that they are less likely to respond to men's violence in this most extreme fashion (Browne and Williams 1989; 1993; Browne, Williams and Dutton 1999). As such, policies and interventions aimed at eliminating men's violent abuse of women, along with services for women victims, may be important contributors to the reduction in homicides where women use lethal violence against a male partner against a backdrop of ongoing violence against her.

Finally, what is to be done about the very small number of women who may *initiate* severe, persistent, repeat physical and sexual violence against a male partner in a context of no violence from the man? We have yet to see any evidence that would enable us to consider this issue. Identification of this putative group would require the same kind of intensive studies that have been done on men's violence, using both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a holistic picture of the violence and the context, consequences, motives and intentions associated with it. What is required is research methods that provide a more adequate representation of this violence and the contexts in which it occurs, rather than conceptual and operationalist abstractions that are once removed from such real-life events. Even if this were to be found, all extant evidence would predict that the numbers would be very small. As such, priority should continue to be given to policies that seek to effectively intervene to end violence against women in intimate relationships.

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