

Explaining Symmetry Across Sex in Intimate Partner Violence: Evolution, Gender Roles, and the Will to Harm

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Intimate partner violence (IPV) is regarded by key stakeholders involved in shaping arrest and intervention policies as a gendered problem. The prevailing assumptions guiding these policies, centered on patriarchal social structures and men's motivation to dominate their female partners, have collectively been called the *gender paradigm*. When states started to enact laws against domestic violence in the late 1970s, it was due to the efforts of battered women and their allies, including second wave feminists fighting for the political, social, and economic advancement of women. The focus was on life-threatening forms of abuse in which women represented, and continue to represent, the much larger share of victims. Since then, IPV has been found to be a more complex problem than originally framed, perpetrated by women as well as men, driven by an assortment of motives, and associated with distal and proximate risk factors that have little to do with gender. Nonetheless, the gender paradigm persists, with public policy lagging behind the empirical evidence. The author suggests some reasons why this is so, among them the much higher rates of violent crimes committed by men, media influence and cognitive biases, political factors, and perpetuation of the very sex-role stereotypes that feminists have sought to extinguish in every other social domain. He then critically reviews two theories used in support of the paradigm, sexual selection theory and social role theory, and explores how empirically driven policies would more effectively lower IPV rates in our communities, while advancing core feminist principles.

KEYWORDS: intimate partner violence; domestic violence; gender roles; symmetry; sexual selection

Reading any daily newspaper or watching the local or national news on television, it is impossible not to be made aware of the multitude of violent crimes committed in our communities. With few exceptions, the crimes are perpetrated by men.

Digging beyond the headlines, the social science research finds higher overall levels of physical and verbal aggression by men in real-life settings (Archer, 2004; Hyde, 2005). Women, of course, also engage in criminal behavior, but at much lower rates than men, especially for violent assaults, and their criminal histories have a later onset and characterized by lower levels of recidivism (Block, Blokland, van der Werff, van Os, & Nieuwbeerta, 2010; Nicholls, Cruise, Greig, & Hinz, 2015). Men commit 79.5% of violent crimes: including 87% of murders and nonnegligent manslaughter, 76.7% of aggravated assaults, and 71.3% of “other assaults” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017). While other men are usually the targets of those crimes, men also target women in sex trafficking (Kotrla, 2010), dowry murders (Rudd, 2001) and rape. Males perpetrate 97.2% of all rapes (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017), including 98% of rapes upon females, about 93% of rapes upon other males (Black et al., 2011), and 92.5% of sex offenses other than rape or prostitution (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017). These statistics, together with the political, social, and economic advantages men have over women, to varying degrees, throughout the world, would suggest that violence is gendered (Bosson, Vandello, & Buckner, 2019).

Less frequently reported are assaults perpetrated in intimate relationships by one partner against another—typically homicide cases or those involving high-profile celebrities, again featuring men as perpetrators, such as the football player Ray Rice, or women as victims, including the pop singer Rhianna. Aggression between dating, cohabitating, or married partners, whether opposite-sex or same-sex, is indeed a serious social problem in the United States and throughout the world. This phenomenon is most commonly known as *domestic violence*, but increasingly the terms *intimate partner violence* (IPV) or *intimate partner abuse* (IPA) have been used to describe such assaults, whether they are of the physical, psychological, or sexual forms. In the United States and a few other English-speaking countries, IPV perpetrators are subject to incarceration and typically mandated to a treatment program known as *batterer intervention*. Men account for the large majority of individuals arrested on an IPV charge and mandated to treatment (Buzawa, Buzawa, & Stark, 2017; Cannon, Hamel, Buttell, & Ferreira, 2016), and women receive the overwhelming share of shelter and other victim services, much of it funded through the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA).

As with violence generally, IPV is conceived as a gendered phenomenon, in which men’s assaults, or threats of assault, serve to enforce male privilege and maintain power in a patriarchal society (Dobash & Dobash, 1988; 1979; Pence & Paymar, 1993). The prevailing view of IPV as a gendered crime, labeled by some as the *gender paradigm* (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005), is reflected throughout the patchwork of governmental and nongovernmental organizations involved in IPV intervention policy and, to a somewhat lesser extent, among researchers. The emphasis on males as perpetrators and females as victims can be found on the online information pages of victim advocacy organizations, such the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence and their affiliated state and local chapters (Hines, 2014); within the various state standards regulating court-mandated intervention programs (Babcock et al., 2016); in police training procedures (Hamel & Russell, 2013); among family law judges

and attorneys (Hamel, Desmarais, Nicholls, Malley-Morrison, & Aaronson, 2009); within the American Bar Association (Dutton, Corvo, & Hamel, 2009); among shelter workers and mental health professionals (Hamel et al., 2009; see also Hamel, Desmarais, & Nicholls, 2007 for a review), and in gender studies textbooks (e.g., Kang, Lessard, Lessard, & Nordmaken, 2017; Wood, 2015). In one notable survey of clinical psychologists in Southern California, involving vignettes of physical and emotional abuse by wives and husbands, the psychologists rated the husbands' aggression as more severe, including the emotional type (Follingstad, DeHart, & Green, 2004). "Like any scholar," writes the author of one popular gender studies textbook (Wood, 2015), "what I write depends largely on available information. Existing research shows that, although both men and women experience violence from intimate partners, 95% of people who are known to be physically abused by romantic partners are women" (p. 11).

The picture is simple: outside and inside the home, it is men who are the aggressors of physical violence.

RESEARCH ON IPA

Except that the picture is not so simple, according to the body of empirical research on IPV prevalence, risk factors, dynamics, and consequences, and the prevalence rates cited by Wood (2015) and others are cherry-picked and not at all based on "available information." In the section below, we draw on a variety of sources, and two in particular. The first is a series of 17 literature reviews, collectively known as the *Partner Abuse State of Knowledge Project* (PASK), which reported on all relevant quantitative studies published after 1990, organized according to sample types: large population and community surveys, dating and student samples, clinical and legal samples. More than 100 individuals from 20 universities and research centers contributed to the project (41 authors + 65 research assistants). Results were published in five special issues of the peer-reviewed journal, *Partner Abuse* (Hamel, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & Hines, 2012), and the full 2,657 manuscript pages, including extensive tables, are available to scholars and the public at www.domesticviolenceresearch.org. The other source is the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), which was administered via telephone throughout the United States for most of the year 2010. A total of 7,421 men and 9,086 women completed this survey (Black et al., 2011).

Prevalence Rates

In the United States and other English-speaking industrialized countries, prevalence rates of perpetration and victimization do not differ significantly between men and women. As part of the PASK research project, Desmarais, Reeves, Nicholls, Telford, and Fiebert (2012) reported on 111 studies and a wide range in perpetration rates due to the variety of samples and operational definitions of IPV. On average, 25.3% of respondents reported IPV perpetration. Rates of female-perpetrated violence

were somewhat higher than male-perpetrated (28.3% vs. 21.6%) as reported for the previous year. From the NISVS data set, Black et al. (2011) reported 12-month female victimization rates of 4.3 million for minor assaults (e.g., slapping, pushing) and 3.2, million for severe assaults (e.g., punching, beating up). Victimization rates for males were 5.1 million minor, and 2.2 million severe. In the rest of the world, men perpetrate IPV at higher rates than women in many countries, but this is not the case everywhere (Esquivel-Santovena, Lambert, & Hamel, 2013; Rozmann, & Ariel, 2018). The PASK review by Esquivel-Santovena et al. (2013) identified 162 peer-reviewed journal articles and government surveys, with data from over 200 studies conducted in all major world regions. The authors identified 40 articles (total of 73 studies) in 49 countries containing data on male and female IPV. Rates of physical PV were higher for female perpetration or male victimization, or were the same across sex, in 62% of the comparisons. Among the studies reviewed were those conducted by Murray Straus and colleagues (Straus, 2001) of 13,601 university students in 32 countries which found IPV rates comparable across sex.

Psychological Abuse. Psychological abuse, including a number of behaviors used to exercise control and dominance over one's partner, are much more prevalent than physical assaults. From their review of 204 peer-reviewed studies, Carney and Barner (2012) determined that psychological abuse has occurred at some point in 80% of relationships, even if much of it involves relatively innocuous types such as yelling or swearing. The authors categorized their findings into two major types of psychological abuse—expressive (e.g., making derogatory comments, shaming) or coercive (e.g., monitoring, isolating, threatening). Broken down by sex, 40% of women and 32% of men reported to have engaged in expressive abuse, and 41% of women and 43% of men said they had perpetrated coercive abuse. These findings were similar to those reported from the NISVS on previous 12-month victimization rate—expressive abuse: 12.3 million women and 10.6 million men; coercive victimization: 12.7 million women and 17.3 million men (Black et al., 2011).

Sexual Coercion. Rates of sexual coercion, however defined, are clearly asymmetrical across sex, especially for rape. The national samples examined by Carney and Barner (2012) reported victimization rates for forced sexual intercourse by a partner of 0.2% for men and 4.5% for women. NISVS data (Black et al., 2011) indicate lifetime rape victimization rates (completed or attempted forced penetration, completed alcohol/drug-facilitated penetration) of 18.3% for women and 1.4% for men. Other forms of sexual violence (e.g., “unwanted sexual contact,” “non-contact unwanted sexual experiences”) were experienced by 44.6% of women and 22.2% of men. In 51% of the rape and 35.7% of other sexual violence against women, the perpetrator was an intimate partner. For male victims, 36.0% of sexual violence other than rape was perpetrated by an intimate partner. Data was not available as to the percentage of male rape victimization by a partner.

Stalking. Black et al. (2011) reported lifetime and 12-month female victimization rates of physical stalking by an intimate partner of 10.7% and 2.8%, respectively; the rates were 2.1% and 0.5% for male victims. However, rates were based on a definition

of stalking that includes “fear and danger concerns,” which, in light of the lower rates of reported fear by men, would skew the data in the female direction. As found in the PASK review by Carney and Barner (2012), which reported similar physical stalking rates, sex differences are much less when all forms of obsessive pursuit behaviors are considered.

The total number of IPA victims depends on what forms of abuse are included, and whether the rates were based on lifetime or for the previous 12-month. The latter are known to be more accurate (Straus, 2009). For example, Table 4.1 in the NISVS report (Black et al., 2011, p. 38) indicates that each year 6,982,000 women and 5,691,000 men are victims of rape, physical violence, or stalking at the hands of their partner. By this measure, women represent about 55% of IPA victims. However, when one adds the 12-month numbers for psychological abuse/control (16,578,000 female and 20,548,000 male victims; see Table 4.9, p. 46), the total number of IPA victims in all categories amount to 23,560 female and 26,239 male victims—with a slightly higher percentage (52.6%) of male victims.

Context, Impact and Dynamics

Reporting on 49 studies, the literature review by Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Misra, Selwyn, and Rohling (2012) concluded that in relationships where physical assaults occur, 57.9% is bidirectional and 42% unidirectional. Of the unidirectional violence, 13.8% is male to female (MFPV) and 28.3% female to male (FMPV). However, findings that in a majority of relationships the violence is bidirectional do not, by themselves, tell us who initiate its. Theoretically, it could be the man in every instance. The review by Hamel (2007a) identified roughly a dozen studies that investigated rates of IPV initiation. Women reported to “striking the first blow” about 50% of the time. In a majority of abusive relationships, reciprocity also exists for psychological abuse between partners, as found in a national adult sample (Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010), and among men (Hamel, Jones, Dutton, & Graham-Kevan, 2015; Stacey, Hazelwood, & Shupe, 1994) and women (Hamel et al., 2015) enrolled in court-mandated into a perpetrator treatment program. Not surprisingly, both male and female respondents report higher levels of such abuse from their partners than what they perpetrate themselves.

Motives. Motives for perpetrating IPV, mostly based on self-reports, are much the same for men and women across studies (Langhinrichsen-Rohling & McCullars, 2012; Raison, & Dutton, 2019), including individuals convicted of an IPV offense court ordered to complete a batter intervention program (Elmquist et al., 2014). Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (2012) reviewed 74 studies and identified a number of motives, many overlapping, and quite similar between men and women. These included a need to express anger and other feelings that they were unable to put into words, because of stress or being under the influence of drugs or alcohol, to get their partner’s attention, out of jealousy, or in retaliation for having been emotionally hurt. Although somewhat less so, symmetry across sex was also found for the motives of control and self-defense. Eight studies directly compared men and women in their

use of IPV to make their partner do something. Three reported no significant gender differences, one had mixed findings, one found women more motivated to perpetrate violence as a result of power/control than were men, and three indicated that men were more motivated; however, effect sizes for these differences were weak.

Of the 10 studies containing data on male and female reports, no statistically significant differences across sex were found among four of these. The female respondents in one study endorsed this motive at significantly lower rates compared to men. In five studies men were significantly less likely to endorse self-defense as a motive, with the caveat that it is difficult for masculine males to admit to perpetrating violence in self-defense, given that this admission implies vulnerability. Overall, self-defense was motive was endorsed in most samples by only a minority of respondents—ranging from 5% to 65% for females and 0% to 50% for males. In two studies, anger was determined to be a greater motive for female-perpetrated IPV, and neither anger or retaliation were a significantly greater motives for men's violence. Jealousy, whether warranted or due to a partner actually cheating, was found to be a motive for men and for women. As suggested by the authors, there may have been an overlap in the female responses between the control and jealousy motives, in light of the greater cultural acceptance for women to admit to perpetrating IPV in response to a partner's infidelity than as a power and control strategy.

Risk Factors. Capaldi, Knoble, Shortt, and Kim (2012) reported on 228 studies on known risk factors for IPV perpetration. They were generally the same for men and women, although a few more relevant for one sex than the other. Risk factors included young age, low income and unemployment, and witnessing and experiencing violence in childhood, especially as mediated by later substance abuse and antisocial behavior in adolescence. There were strong correlations between adult IPV and previous conduct disorder in childhood, and for association with aggressive peers in childhood and adolescence. Among the personality factors to predict IPV were proviolent beliefs and a wish to dominate the partner, by either sex, and insecure attachment and negative emotionality, including jealousy. Sexist attitudes predicted men's violence, but not traditional sex-role beliefs. Depression and poor self-esteem correlated more with female perpetration. These findings were corroborated in the meta-analytic review by Birkley and Eckhardt (2015), who identified as significant risk factors anger, hostility internalized negative emotions, and poor emotion regulation—especially for perpetration of moderate–severe IPV. Alcohol abuse was weakly correlated with IPV perpetration, although stronger for women, and drug abuse was a more reliable predictor than alcohol-only abuse. There was a strong correlation for low relationship satisfaction and being in a violent or high-conflict relationship.

Impact. Compared to nonvictims, according to a review of 132 studies on the impact of IPA on partners (Lawrence, Oringo, & Brock, 2012), victims of physical abuse experience more physical injuries, poorer health outcomes and physical functioning, poorer cognitive functioning, and higher rates of psychological disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression). The impact is generally greater on female victims for physical IPV, although men and women are about equally impacted by psychological abuse. One important sex difference in IPV dynamics is the greater fear that physical IPV

causes to female victims in comparison to men, considering their typically smaller size and lesser ability to defend themselves, as evidenced by the significantly higher percentage of women who seek medical attention for their injuries and who are killed in an intimate homicide (Hamel, 2019).

Perhaps due to the typically more frightening nature of men's violence, the immediate impact on children of witnessing a parent assault the other is greater for MFPV in terms of internalized symptoms such as depression and anxiety (MacDonnel, 2012). However, in line with principles of observational learning, MFPV and FMPV each predict externalizing symptoms (e.g., aggression, problems at school), as well as dating violence in adolescence and IPV in adulthood. Witnessing IPV by either parent was associated with long-term mental health issues (e.g., alcohol abuse, depression; Kaura & Allen, 2004; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Neidig, & Thorne, 1995; MacDonnel, 2012; Straus, 1992). Except for sexual abuse, women abuse their children at higher rates than do men (McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & Green, 2006). A national incidence study reported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services indicated that children report that the biological mother was the perpetrator in 75% of abuse and neglect cases, and the biological father the perpetrator in 43% of cases (Sedlak et al., 2010). Children evidence the same sorts of symptoms as a result of being directly abused as when they witness IPV, but to a large extent when they experience both.

IPV Typologies

Based on a review of the literature on the characteristics of men arrested on an IPV charge, Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) proposed an offender typology that is widely used today. About half of these men, what they called the *family-only* types, engage in infrequent, low-level physical and psychological abuse upon their partners, have no criminal history, and exhibit few, if any, serious mental health symptoms. The *dysphoric/borderline* types, accounting for about a quarter of male offenders, engage in more serious and frequent physical assaults, and can be highly domineering. They evidence characteristics of borderline personality disorder and depression, tend to be emotionally insecure, and have poor impulse control, but generally are not violent outside the home. The remainder, labeled as *generally violent/antisocial*, also perpetrate serious IPV but have criminal histories. They are highly impulsive, frequently abuse substances, and exhibit a dismissing attachment style rather than the preoccupied (clingy) style that characterizes dysphoric–borderline men. These categories have also been identified among female IPV offenders (Babcock, Miller, & Siard, 2003).

The other well-known offender typology (Johnson, 2008) described the various ways that IPV is manifested on the relationship level. Most couples experience *situational violence*, in which two essentially family-only types occasionally allow conflicts to mutually escalate into low-level physical violence but minimally engage in psychological abuse or controlling behaviors. In contrast, what Johnson initially labeled

intimate terrorism (later *coercive-controlling violence*, but more commonly known as *battering*) is typically chronic, usually leads to physical injury, and accompanied by high and frequent rates of controlling emotional abuse. Although Johnson initially suggested that men represent the great majority of intimate terrorists, subsequent research found that his conclusions were premature. Large-scale representative sample surveys in fact indicate that rates of intimate terrorism perpetration, as defined by Johnson (serious physical violence and high levels of psychological abuse and control) are equal between men and women (Jasinski, Blumenstein, & Morgan, 2014; Laroche, 2005).

These findings may seem surprising, considering men's much greater ability to inflict harm because of their relative size and strength, and given the greater impact that physical abuse has on women, in terms of fear, physical injuries, and mental health symptoms. The accuracy of battering rates depends on what is measured. The significance of the Laroche (2005) and Jasinski et al. (2014) findings is that they nullify the previously discussed assumptions from the gender paradigm that women are not motivated to control. However, it is men who perpetrate the most extreme cases of serious violence—the type that involves forcible rape, hospitalization, or death—for which the term “partner terrorism” was originally intended. Clearly, while male and female batterers alike seek to dominate their partners, men can more easily impose their will with physical violence (Stark, 2007). Why they usually refrain from doing so is at least partly due to cultural norms, perhaps driven by evolutionary forces, as discussed later. The extreme end of female-perpetrated IPV might be termed *emotional terrorism*, reflecting their ability to inflict a great deal of harm without the threat of extreme physical violence.

POLITICAL EXPLANATIONS

Clearly, perceptions about IPV do not square with the body of research evidence. We briefly discuss some of the political reasons for why this is so, then seek to reconcile the perceptions and realities of IPV by exploring the major theories of sex differences in human behavior.

The late Murray Straus, one of the early pioneers in the field of IPV whose voluminous research articles and scholarly critiques appeared in peer-reviewed social science journals over a period of five decades, made some pointed observations that remain relevant today. To the predominance of news stories about male-perpetrated IPV and the much higher rates of arrest of men for violent crimes, including assaults against intimate partners, Straus offered additional reasons for misperceptions about IPV among domestic violence stakeholders. Among the most common, he cited a lack of attention to the heterogeneous nature of the problem, a dearth of sound research evidence available to the public, and the difficulty of correcting false information once it is disseminated.¹ Straus pointed to the presence of gender stereotypes, and a reluctance among stakeholders to acknowledge the serious problem of female-perpetrated IPV lest it detract from efforts to help battered women, the most vulnerable

victims (Straus, 2009). Gender symmetry in IPV is also seen as a threat to feminism because:

. . . a key step in the effort to achieve an equalitarian society is to bring about recognition of the harm that a patriarchal system causes. The removal of patriarchy as a main cause of PV weakens a dramatic example of the harmful effects of patriarchy. This is unfortunate, but by no means critical because the effort to achieve equality can continue to be made on the basis of many other ways in which women continue to be subordinate to men. (p. 13)

Straus was particularly troubled by efforts from many researchers to conceal, minimize, and distort evidence of symmetry. In another article (Straus, 2007), he enumerated, and provided examples, of the seven ways that this has been done: (a) suppress evidence, (b) avoid obtaining data inconsistent with the patriarchal dominance theory, (c) cite only studies showing male perpetration, (d) conclude that the results support feminist beliefs when they do not, (e) create “evidence” by citation, (f) obstruct publication of articles and obstruct funding research that might contradict the idea that male dominance is the cause of IPV, and (g) harass, threaten, and penalize researchers who produce evidence that contradicts feminist beliefs. One famous illustration of Straus’ fourth example is from Kernsmith (2005), who asked male and female participants in perpetrator programs about their motives for assaulting a partner. No significant differences emerged between the sexes in the frequency of reported self-defense. Women’s assaults were more likely than the men’s in retaliation, to “discipline” their partner (“get your partner to do what you wanted,” “to punish your partner,” “felt jealous”), and to exert power and control. Because retaliation was endorsed more frequently by women compared to the power and control motive, the authors concluded that “females are not generally the primary aggressor in the abusive incidents and may, instead, be responding to a partner’s aggression” (p. 179). They didn’t mention that the men, too, were more inclined to endorse retaliation over coercion.

Over time, there has been some softening of the gender paradigm, in that most researchers and mental health professionals, and some battered women advocates, have come to acknowledge symmetry in rates of physical and emotional abuse perpetration, and recognize the role that other factors (e.g., childhood trauma, substance abuse) play in IPV (Hamel, 2009). Many, however, have not yielded on the issue of control, despite evidence to the contrary. Men are presumed to assault their intimate partners as a means of exercising power and control over them, whether to enforce male privilege or for psychological reasons; whereas women do so primarily in self-defense, or in resistance to men’s attempts dominate them (Dragiewicz, 2008; Kimmel, 2002), or done for expressive (emotion-driven) rather than instrumental reasons (Hamberger, Lohr, Bonge, & Tolin, 1997; Swan, Gambone, Caldwell, Sullivan, & Snow, 2008). This alternative version of the paradigm appears to have deep roots in the sort of gender stereotypes cited by Straus (2009). Evidence of such a bias was reported by Hamel et al. (2007), who presented three vignettes to professionals ($N = 401$) working in the field of IPV. The subjects were asked to guess the motives of the aggressor in each vignette (half depicting male-on-female IPV, the other female-on-male IPV) on a continuum from exclusively expressive to exclusively coercive.

Across subjects, female-perpetrated aggression was deemed less coercive than male-perpetrated aggression, particularly by victim advocates.

In 2009, the journal editor at Springer Publishing Company recruited this author to help launch a new scholarly journal, *Partner Abuse* (Morrison, Hamel, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010), explicitly to provide a greater degree of objectivity and transparency to the IPV research enterprise. Over its first 10 years, the journal has flourished, publishing high-quality, cutting-edge research on a broad range of topics, including the celebrated PASK literature reviews previously cited. However, despite the journal's definition of IPV as a human problem, one finds in the literature reviews of many submitted manuscripts reference to women only as victims and men only as perpetrators. Perhaps the gender paradigm has weakened, but it persists nonetheless, stubbornly, into this third decade of the new millennium. In a viewpoint article published in an earlier issue of the journal, Corvo and Johnson (2012) reflected on the historical joining of the battered women advocacy movement with second wave feminism in the 1970s, and the disproportionate amount of attention and resources (including a vigorous law enforcement response) given to one particular problem relative to other forms of family violence, such as the abuse and neglect of children, and wondered if this was driven, at least partly, by some sort of collective sense of revenge:

The rationale and necessity of crafting and maintaining a gerrymandered policy framework around the victimization of women (excluding, distorting, or minimizing male victimization or violence among other family role sets) becomes clearer: It is a political statement about the worth of women. This delegated revenge allows society to delegate its responsibility for the historical subordination of women to a subset of scapegoated perpetrators, making them approved targets of punishment for society's historical and current culpability. The more punitive, retributivist legal stance toward domestic violence offenders is manifestly a crime-control policy, but with a latent social function of compensatorily affirming women's status. (p. 99)

The confounding of partisan policy in IPV with the legitimate pursuit of social, economic, and political reforms on behalf of women may have instead harmed the feminist cause and compromised, rather than affirm, women's status. For the reasons outlined above, the gender paradigm persists, reinforcing harmful sexist stereotypes, among them the ones regarding female agency, or presumed lack thereof, by obfuscating the evolutionary, biological, and cultural forces that account for why people actually behave. It is those forces that we now turn, offering a clearer picture of IPV—as a human, and not a gender problem, one that is fully compatible with sound principles of scientific inquiry, feminism, and human rights.

EXPLANATIONS FROM EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

According to sexual selection theory (SST), over the past 200,000 years natural selection processes have resulted in a differentiation between men and women in their reproductive strategies for ensuring descendants. Due to the prolonged period of gestation, a woman's reproductive interests are best served by choosing a mate who has

the physical and mental capabilities (e.g., strength, bravery, competitiveness) to provide the resources required for the survival of her offspring, and who can protect her from danger. Men's reproductive interests, on the other hand, can be served by two possible strategies. One is mating with numerous partners, as exemplified in polygamous societies, and among men everywhere who avoid relationship commitment (Bjorklund & Shackelford, 1999; Schmitt, 2003). The second option is monogamy, which can be advantageous to men because an investment of resources in one partner increases the odds of the children surviving, with a greater certainty of paternity (Albert & Arnocky, 2016; Daly, Wilson, & Weghorst, 1982; Smuts, 1995; Wilson, & Daly, 1992). When this strategy is used, men benefit by seeking women who are young and physically attractive because these features correlate with fertility, accounting for why women are so often regarded as "sex objects." Women, in turn, are prone to regard men as "success objects."

When evolutionary psychologists first started to examine IPV, they focused on male aggression. They proposed that when men suspect their partner might cheat on them or leave the relationship, they will employ a variety of strategies in response, to avoid losing the partner or being cuckolded (unwittingly having to raise another man's child). Some common "mate retention" strategies are working harder to earn more money, showering the partner with attention and gifts, and letting her have her way. They also include what is known as "mate guarding," which involves possessive behaviors. Mate guarding is the evolutionary explanation (sometimes known as *proprietaryness* theory) for why IPV is supposed to be a gendered crime perpetrated by men who wish to maintain dominance over their female partners, to the point that they are willing to kill them (Wilson & Daly, 1992). The corresponding lack of consideration for female-perpetrated IPV can be explained by women's greater fear in comparison with men, an evolutionarily determined means of survival in light of their relatively smaller size and lesser strength (Schmitt, 2015).

Fearfulness of bodily injury and health injury is arguably the psychological mechanism that evolution has built into women to protect them from death, helping to ensure the survival of their young. Thus the fact that women are less physically aggressive than men, in almost all arenas of life and in all cultures around the world, can be explained by an evolutionary principle. Women are more averse to physical aggression than men because of its reproductive impact. (Raine, 2013, p. 35)

This fear is evidenced in the low rates of physically aggressive and danger-seeking behaviors, greater punishment sensitivity, and higher vulnerability to depression in women relative to men (Campbell, 2013; Cross, Copping, & Campbell, 2011). The latter are reflected in the higher anxiety scores and tender-mindedness (e.g., nurturing) scores for women across numerous personality studies and meta-analyses over several decades (Feingold, 1994), and high scores relative to men on the Neuroticism scale of the NEO inventory, in the United States and Canada (Weisberg, De Young, & Hirsh, 2011). Evolutionary psychologists argue that some other differences on the

NEO between men and women, because they are evident across cultures, further support sex roles predicted by sexual selection theories—for example, men’s higher scores on Openness to Experience, and women’s higher scores on the dimension of Agreeableness (Schmitt, Realo, Voracek, & Allik, 2008). Women’s greater fear can also be found in corresponding differences across sex in certain brain functions. Among these differences, neuropsychologists have identified a higher level of amygdala sensitivity to threatening stimuli, a heightened awareness of fear experiences from activity in the anterior cingulate, and greater prefrontal cortex control over impulses (Campbell, 2013).

Mate Guarding

Clearly, women can, and do, overcome their fears, when perpetrating IPV, when competing with other women for mates, when choosing to leave one mate for another, or having sexual relations outside the primary relationship, what evolutionary psychologists call “poaching,” done more successfully by women than men (Schmitt, 2004). Poaching, or the threat of poaching, tends to instigate a jealous response. Research has shown women to be as jealous as men, although a debate persists as to whether women’s jealousy is primarily emotional, driven by fear of losing resources, and men’s jealousy is primarily driven by a fear of losing opportunities to reproduce (Buss, 2013; Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; Eagly & Wood, 2013a; Geary, 2010; Harris, 2003). To guard against potential poaching, men and women use a variety of tactics, which evolutionary psychologists study with a questionnaire known as the Mate Retention Inventory, or MRI (Shackleford, Goetz, & Buss, 2005).

The MRI category known as *direct mate guarding* includes the subcategories of vigilance (e.g., “called at unexpected times to see who my partner was with”), concealment of mate (e.g., “refused to introduce my partner to my same-sex friends”), and monopolization of time (e.g., “insisted that my partner stay at home rather than going out”). Results from mate retention studies conducted with married couples in the United States (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Jonason, Li, & Buss, 2010), Spain (De Miguel & Buss, 2010), and Croatia (Kardum, Hudek-Knezevic, & Gracanin, 2006) indicate that these tactics are used by women at rates at least equal to men. One sex difference is that women tend to use these tactics throughout the relationship, whereas men are more likely to use them when suspecting their partner of cheating, which explains why women are so often killed when they try to leave. Another difference is that men tend to score significantly higher on the submission and debasement dimension (e.g., “became a slave to my partner,” “gave in to my partner’s every wish.”). The mate-guarding tactics identified in these studies parallel the expressive and coercive forms of psychological abuse cited earlier, perpetrated equally between men and women in the general population (Black et al., 2011; Carney & Barner, 2012).

These behaviors, long known to intervention providers as the “Power and Control Wheel” (Pence & Paymar, 1993), were expanded by Hamel et al. (2015) after a review of the research literature and available treatment manuals into the following

10 categories (consisting of 62 items): threats and intimidation (1–4), isolation and jealousy (5–12), economic abuse (13–18), diminishment of self-esteem (19–31), general control (32–40), obsessive relational intrusion (e.g., stalking, 41–43), passive-aggressiveness and withdrawal (44–49), using children (50–56), legal system abuse (57–60), and sexual coercion (61–62). These items made up a questionnaire administered to 400 men and women in court-mandated perpetrator treatment programs in California. The large majority of items (47) were reported at comparable rates across the sexes. Men reported significantly more perpetration for six items: “tries to restrict partner’s movements,” “controls the money and excludes partner from financial decisions,” “withholds child support,” “forgets important things (e.g., to pay bills or relay calls/messages),” “pressures partner to have sex when he/she doesn’t want to,” and “pressures partner to engage in unwanted sexual practices” (but the latter item rarely endorsed, with 80% of the sample indicating they never engaged in this behavior). Women reported significantly more perpetration for nine items: “searches partner’s purse/wallet/cell phone calls,” “makes fun of partner’s sexual performance,” “blames partner for all the problems in the relationship,” “nags” (repeated and excessive complaints or requests), “refuses to accept no’ for an answer,” “calls, pages or text messages constantly,” “withholds affection or sex,” “locks partner out of bedroom or residence when angry,” and “tells children negative things about partner” (Hamel et al., 2015).

Mate-guarding studies that have sought to connect these behaviors to the use of physical violence have focused on male perpetration, and failed to consider such implications for women (Buss & Duntley, 2011; Wilson & Daly, 1992). As discussed earlier, however, the IPV literature indicates that the use of controlling behaviors together with physical assault, a common definition of *battering*, is perpetrated equally by men and women. From an evolutionary psychology perspective, the one study that sought to examine such connections across sex was conducted in the United Kingdom, using a convenience of 1,350 respondents (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2009). According to the authors:

Both men’s and women’s use of controlling behavior were positively correlated with their own use of physical aggression . . . This was found for both self and partner reports, and is inconsistent with the view that controlling behavior is only linked to men’s physical aggression (if paternity uncertainty were the only explanation of partner violence.) It indicates that in both sexes direct mate guarding is associated with physical aggression. (p. 448)

Evolutionary psychologists have also explored the relationship between mate retention and an individual’s “mate value”—whether or not he or she possesses the qualities associated with reproductive success. In general, the higher their mate value, the more likely a person will eschew direct mate guarding or aggression, and employ more benign strategies, for example, benefit provisioning (being kind, buying things) by men, and appearance enhancement and sexual favors by women. De Miguel and Buss (2010) found that mate guarding, by males or females, is less common among individuals who score low on the Neuroticism dimension, or high on the

Agreeableness dimension, of the NEO. In a subsequent study, individuals with high levels of honesty and humility were less likely to engage in mate guarding, or other behaviors involving the manipulation, exploitation, or deception of intimate partners (Holden, Zeigler-Hill, Pham, & Shackelford, 2014). The so-called “Dark Triad” traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy have been positively correlated with mate poaching and mate-guarding behaviors (Jonason et al., 2010). In general, men exhibit Dark Triad traits at rates higher than women, but these traits are elevated in women who are under stress, along with dominance and dismissing attachment (Schmitt et al., 2004). Additionally, women with low mate value engage in higher levels of indirect (Arnocky, Sunderani, Miller, & Vaillacourt, 2011) and direct aggression (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2009) upon their intimate partners. Ultimately, these are poor solutions, as “more effort in mate retention may actually lead to more abandonment by current mates, perhaps because the tactics of mate retention covary with the Dark Triad actually drive partners away” (Jonason et al., 2010, p. 376).

Social Role Theory and Gender Similarities

Around the world, research on IPV has framed it a gendered phenomenon, with the role played by culture, especially norms governing male and female roles and behaviors viewed as essential in understanding prevalence rates and dynamics (Asay, DeFrain, Metzger, & Moyer, 2014; Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006; Malley-Morrison, 2004). According to social role theory, sex differences in behavior may have some evolutionary roots, in light of obvious size and strength differences between men and women, but have been maintained culturally through the traditional division of labor that expects men to exhibit agency, present as competent and in control, and to suppress feelings that might make one vulnerable, such as sadness or anxiety, so as to compete and succeed in the workplace. Conversely, women are expected to be communal and nurturing and to suppress anger and aggression, qualities needed for raising children and managing a household (Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Eagly, Wood, & Kiekman, 2000). In their review, Haines, Deaux, and Lofaro (2016) found little change in common gender stereotypes between 1983 and 2014. Men continue to be seen as self-confident, competitive, and able to stand up under pressure; women are viewed as emotional, gentle, family-oriented, and deferring to the judgment of others. With the entry of women into previously male-dominated occupations it has become obvious that many traditional gender expectations are the product of stereotypes rather than evolution or biology, and unnecessarily support structural inequalities. Women have, for example, firmly dispelled assumptions that they lack the leadership and agentic qualities required to become police officers or company CEOs.

There were minimal differences across sex in one review of 46 meta-analyses on cognitive and psychological variables (Hyde, 2005; 2014), and a later review of 106 meta-analyses by Zell, Krizan, and Teeter (2015). According to the *gender similarities hypothesis*, actual differences between men and women have been exaggerated due to gender role expectations. In numerous experiments, apparent differences (e.g.,

math performance, sexual desire) diminish or disappear completely in situations where gender role conformity is not expected or obstacles to performance are removed (Bosson et al., 2019, Conley, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, & Valentine, 2011; Hyde, 2005; Peterson & Shibley-Hyde, 2010). Other research has reported only small effect sizes across sex for structural brain mechanisms for aggression (Denson, O'Dean, Blake, & Beames, 2018); or for testosterone levels that correlate weakly and inconsistently with aggression, and only slightly more so for men compared to women (Archer, Graham-Kevan, & Davies, 2005; Eisenegger, Haushofer, & Fehr, 2011). Sex differences certainly exist, but are overly simplified due to the human need to make sense of a complex social environment. Working with a large data set, Carothers and Reis (2013) determined that with few exceptions, these differences are better understood as *dimensional*, with differences of degree, as opposed to *taxonic* (presuming the existence of distinct categories).

In response, evolutionary psychologists frame culture and learning primarily as the unfolding of genetically determined programs rather than independent causal forces (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). They tend to downplay the significance of social factors, citing meta-analytical findings from twin studies finding heritability to account for 50% of the variability in psychological traits (Plomin, DeFries, Knopik, & Neiderhiser, 2016; Polderman et al., 2015), as well as cross-cultural research finding that sex differences tend to increase, rather than decrease, in countries with greater gender equity and egalitarian sex-role socialization (Schmitt, 2015). SST, they say, merely guides the research, whose findings are meant to be descriptive, not proscriptive, and fully compatible with feminism (Buss & Schmitt, 2011).

Critics cite numerous methodological problems with SST, not the least of which is how it is conceptualized—on the one hand too general to be proven, and on the other presented as a metatheory when in fact it is a research theory and therefore subject to falsification (Tate, 2012). Biological factors exist, they contend, but culture is far more determinative than SST would allow (Eagly & Wood, 2013a, 2013b) and some traits highly relevant to IPV, such as conduct disorders, are strongly mediated by environmental factors. At the very least, cultural beliefs amplify biological sex differences (e.g., Benatar, 2012). For example, even if one accepts wife-beating as a form of mate guarding as explained by SST (Sexual Selection Theory, survey data from 12 studies conducted outside of the United States, mostly in Africa and Asia, indicate that between 28% and 41% of men believe that it is sometimes necessary for a husband to beat his wife. Among the reasons given for why wife-beating might be justified include her refusing him sex, infidelity, burning his food, arguing, wasting money, and leaving the house without his permission (Esquivel-Santovena et al., 2013) These attitudes are not the same everywhere, but two large meta-analyses have found the highest male-perpetrated IPV rates in the most patriarchal countries, as measured by the Gender Empowerment Measure (Archer, 2006; Schmitt, 2015).

Aggression Outside the Home, Revisited. Findings from social role theory and SST together have provided a much fuller, more nuanced picture of human personality and behavior, but have failed to support the gender paradigm in IPV. We will

first revisit the topic of aggression outside the home, then investigate how social role theory supports a gender-inclusive conception of IPV and findings of symmetry discussed previously

Depending on how it is defined, it is debatable whether or not aggression outside the home can be considered a strictly “gendered” phenomenon. The classic meta-analysis by Eagly and Steffen (1986) reported a low effect size (0.29) for men’s higher level of aggression overall, the differences mostly accounted for by injury-producing violence (with other men the overwhelming percentage of victims). According to Archer’s review (2004), previously cited, men are only slightly more verbally abusive than women ($d = .19$), and women engage in high levels of relational aggression, mostly against other women, as found in other reviews (e.g., Bjorkqvist, 1994; Frieze, 2005). Women also engage in a large share of cyberbullying (Bartlett & Coyne, 2014). Aggressive women report feeling more guilt than their male counterparts, but feel comparable levels of hostility and anger (Averil, 1983; Brody & Hall, 2008); and they are just as motivated to harm when able to do so anonymously, as evidenced in various laboratory studies (Frodi, Macaulay, & Thome, 1977; Lightdale & Prentice, 1994). Additionally, the risk factors for aggression outside the home are nearly the same across the sexes (Nicholls et al., 2015; Nicholls, Greaves, & Moretti, 2015), although some, such as childhood sexual abuse, feature more prominently as predictors of female aggression.

Gender Stereotypes in Relationships

As measured by the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick et al., 2000), people throughout the world harbor sexist stereotypes about how women relate to men and navigate relationships. Examples of *hostile sexism* are as follows:

“Women seek to gain power by getting control over men”

“Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash.”

“When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically about being discriminated against.”

(Glick & Fiske, 2001, p. 118)

Cross-culturally, hostile stereotypes are also held about how men relate to women, as measured on the Ambivalence Toward Men Inventory (AMI; Glick & Fiske, 1999a; Glick et al., 2004). Among those are such items as:

“A man who is sexually attracted to a woman typically has no morals about doing whatever it takes to get her in bed.”

“Men would be lost in this world if women weren’t there to guide them.”

“When it comes down to it, most men are really like children.”

(Glick & Fiske, 1999b, p. 536)

As with the more general stereotypes about women discussed previously, relationship attitudes as measured on the ASI and AMI are held by men as well as women.

Even if some stereotypes describe real differences across the sexes, they serve mostly to amplify, reinforce, and maintain them, and more importantly can fuel conflicts that may lead to violence.

Masculinity and Men's Gender Role Expectations. In the United States, traditional gender role expectations and norms of masculinity are weakly correlated with male-perpetrated IPV. The oft-cited meta-analytic review by Sugarman and Frankel (1996) examined the relationship between patriarchal ideology and wife assault, using three measures of patriarchal ideology: attitudes toward the appropriateness of using violence upon a partner; gender attitudes (views regarding prescribed roles for men and women), and gender schemas (the degree to which men identify with culturally expected male gender traits and behaviors, according to the Bem Sex-Role Inventory; BSRI). The authors found positive correlation between IPV perpetration and proviolent attitudes, but not for traditional gender role expectations nor masculine gender schemas. In fact, effect sizes were in the opposite direction for the latter, suggesting that partner-violent men are less likely to exhibit classic masculine gender traits and behaviors.

In the subsequent literature review by Moore and Stuart (2005) there were strong-moderate correlations between IPV by men and approval of violence, using the Inventory of Beliefs about Wife Beating (IBWB), but mixed results across studies for correlations between IPV and traditional masculine ideology and gender role expectations. The authors found much higher and consistent correlations between men's IPV perpetration and high scores on the Gender-Role Conflict Scale (GRCS) and the Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale (MGRS), indicating that identification with traditional masculine gender roles "may only be relevant to partner violence when considering the extent to which he feels that toughness and power and important to him and the extent to which he experiences stress and conflict when he perceives a challenge to his toughness and power" (p. 56). Insecurity about one's masculinity also predicted IPV in a more recent study (Reidy, Berke, Gentile, & Zeichner, 2014).

These findings suggest that the correlations between masculine norms and male patriarchal role expectations and IPV are not causal, but reflect variations in individual personalities. As discussed by Dutton (1994), it is that men who are insecure, or prone to aggression, cite patriarchal attitudes in an *excuse* for their violence, or as Sugarman and Frankel (1996) put it, "The final model would maintain that a patriarchal belief structure can constitute a form of post-hoc accountmaking used to protect self-esteem or maintain self-consistency" (p. 29).

The Home and Women's Fear Reduction. The Archer (2004) review of sex differences in aggression indicated that they become more pronounced in the male direction the riskier and more dangerous the behavior—for example, assaults upon other men, and the perpetration of intimate partner homicide. In laboratory experiments, women target other women more than men (Frodi et al., 1977). However, as has been amply demonstrated, women target male partners in their intimate relationships. To resolve this apparent contradiction, a team of researchers at Durham University in the United Kingdom set up an ingenious experiment using a university sample of 59 male and 115 female university students. Subjects were presented with scenarios in

which they were asked to determine whether they would be likely to respond verbally or physically to a provocation by a same-sex best friend, an opposite-sex best friend, and a partner. The female subjects endorsed verbal or physical aggression upon a male partner more often than upon either a same-sex or opposite-sex friend. Male subjects endorsed physical or verbal aggression upon a same-sex friend more frequently than an opposite-sex friend or partners. For women, therefore, aggression was a function of intimacy with the target, whereas for men it was a function of target sex. In other words, women raise their aggression around intimate partners, overcoming their natural fear responses, and men curtail their aggressive impulses around women, as demanded by norms of male chivalry (Cross & Campbell, 2011; Cross, Tee, & Campbell, 2011).

One explanation given for women's ability to reduce fear in intimate relationships is the role played by the hormone oxytocin. There is some evidence that the hormone lowers amygdala activity in response to fear-inducing stimuli. Oxytocin has been found in studies with rodent mothers to help her bond with her pups while increasing her aggressive response to potential predators. In human females, oxytocin helps lower stress levels postpartum, and increase mother–infant maternal bonding, but it is also released with genital stimulation, sexual intercourse, and orgasm, possibly serving to perhaps increase pair bonding with the father. More than for men, establishing a sexual relationship is for a woman a much riskier endeavor, and oxytocin very well may reduce her apprehension (Campbell, 2010; Cross & Campbell, 2011). “A reduction in fear of a particular partner,” the authors say, “could facilitate aggressive as well as sexual impulses: In other words, the reduction in fear required to establish a sexual relationship would also disinhibit aggression toward that partner” (p. 395). One study, again using a university student sample, determined that oxytocin, compared to a placebo, would predict a greater willingness to perpetrate IPV by individuals high in trait aggression than low trait aggression, for males and females, once again showcasing the relevance of individual factors (DeWall et al., 2014).

Contrary to gender paradigm ideology, violence in the home does not have popular support, and much less so for violence by the male partner (Straus, Kaufman-Kantor, & Moore, 1997). Depending on the question order only 0.8%–1.9% of women and 1.2%–2.9% of men surveyed in a national study of 5,238 adults across the United States said they approve of a man hitting his wife or girlfriend to “discipline/keep her in line,” and only slightly more would approve if the woman were to strike him first (5.8%–8.6% of women, 8.2%–11.3% of men). More men and women (3.4%–6.5% and 3.2%–5.6%, respectively) approved of a woman hitting her husband or boyfriend to discipline/keep him in line, and about a third of the sample said they were OK with a woman hitting her male partner if (Simon et al., 2001). It should be noted that while approval of male-perpetrated IPV, as reported by Esquivel-Santovena et al. (2013), is much higher in more patriarchal countries, none of the surveys asked respondents about their views on husband-beating.

Moore and Stuart (2005), cited above, also found correlations between male-perpetrated IPV and relationship power. However, marriages dominated by either the husband or the wife are characterized by high conflict and IPV. As part of the

National Family Violence Survey of U.S. couples, researchers at the University of New Hampshire examined the relationship between marital power, conflict, and violence. Power was measured according to “who has the final say” in decisions regarding: buying a car, having children, what residence to take, what job either partner should take, whether a partner should go to work or quit work, and how much money to spend each week on food. Among the more noteworthy findings, it was almost as many relationships were dominated by the wife (160) as the husband (200), and the correlation between relationship conflict and IPV held for both the female-dominated and male-dominated households (Coleman & Straus, 1986).

Women often dominate in the home because they have traditionally regarded it as their domain (Straus, 1999), having long being denied the kinds of income-producing occupations reserved for men. Regardless of the ultimate reasons why, whether due culturally proscribed gender roles or evolutionary forces women have traditionally taken pride in taking charge of household affairs, what some have termed *maternal gatekeeping* (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Cannon, Schopope-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2008; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Kulik & Tsoref, 2010). Some women, as with some men, will physically assault their partner to protect those interests when unwilling, or unable, to resolve conflicts peacefully. Clearly, relationship power can be exercised by either party, for many reasons, including psychological reasons that have little to do with proscribed gender roles, as will be discussed later. One of the more notable findings from the NISVS was the higher rate of physical violence among lesbians compared to rates by gay men or men and women in heterosexual relationships (Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013), a finding that is hard to explain by traditional gender roles (Dutton, 1994).

Nonetheless, gender roles are relevant insofar as they are a source of friction and conflict. In this sense, individuals fall back on a sense of gender-based entitlement to excuse their behavior. The program curriculum by Hamel (2014) for court-mandated IPV perpetrators features information and workbook exercises that address these issues. In the men’s curriculum, clients are asked to answer and discuss the following questions:

Do you see yourself as the “man of the house?” Do you refuse to do household tasks because it’s “women’s work?” Do you expect such favors as sex or having your dinner prepared each night because this is your “right” as a man? Do you expect your partner to always be loving and understanding, because “that’s how women should be?” Do you dismiss what she says because she’s too “emotional?” (p. 266)

The questions that women are asked to answer and discussed are these:

Do you think of the home as your “domain,” or that being a woman or mother gives you certain privileges? When you ask your husband to help with household tasks, do you supervise him, or re-do these tasks yourself so they are done “right?” Do you put pressure on him to work more, because “men are supposed to provide?” Do you justify hitting him because he’s physically bigger and should just “take it?” (p. 266)

Benevolent Sexism

Relationship attitudes and expectations, as measured on the ASI and AMI, include items other than the hostile ones enumerated previously. The other items represent what is known as *benevolent sexism*. For women, they include:

“Women should be cherished and protected by men.”

“A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.”

“Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well-being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives.”

From an evolutionary perspective:

A man’s reproductive potential is linked to the health and wellbeing of his partner; should she sustain injury, her ability to bear and invest in offspring may be damaged. Likewise, her death is very costly to her partner’s fitness since any existing children would be left without a mother . . . and no further children would be born. Thus, sexual selection has presented men with a double-edged sword; violence can be used towards a partner as a means of reproductive control, offering protection from the threat of cuckoldry, but violence also carries the risk of injury, which may have severe reproductive consequences. Additionally, a man’s use of aggression towards his partner would, to a large extent, negate the belief that he could protect her, possibly leading her to seek out new relationships. From an evolutionary perspective therefore, we would expect that in general, men would seek to protect their partners from harm, and this would serve as an inhibitory force to aggression. (Driscoll, 2011, p. 181)

In social role theory, males are expected to fulfill certain culturally derived stereotypical expectations, such as being strong, loyal, and good providers, the male version of benevolent sexism as measured on from Ambivalence Towards Men Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1999a). Below are some examples:

“Men are less likely to fall apart in emergencies than women are.”

“Men are mainly useful to provide financial security for women”

“Men are more willing to put themselves in danger to protect others.”

“Women are incomplete without men.”

Egalitarian men who do not conform to stereotypical male gender roles are stigmatized as weak, uncertain and lacking confidence, and often assumed to be gay, by other men and by women (Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2010; Rudman, Mescher, & Moss-Racusin, 2012). The consequences of hostile and benevolent sexism on IPV arrest and intervention policies ought not be difficult to imagine. Studies find male victims to be arrested at rates disproportionately higher than women, even when controlling for degree of injury (Hamel & Russell, 2013; Shernock, & Russell, 2012). They are highly reluctant to call the police (who are prone to deride or disbelieve them), and too often are not taken seriously by shelter workers and mental health professionals (e.g., Cook, 2009; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Hamel, 2007b; Hines, Brown, & Dunning, 2007; Migliaccio, 2002). Men face formidable obstacles to revealing

victimization. “The lack of public recognition of the problem,” writes Cook (2009), “adds to the feeling of isolation and self-blame for a situation that seems personally unique or at least very rare. The lack of local nonprofit crisis lines to discuss issues with a neutral informed party is particularly cruel. The male victim is left to his own devices” (p. 107).

As it accounts for male restraint against females, benevolent sexism also accounts for the sense of entitlement and lessened fear in women, who feel justified in assaulting their intimate partners (Driscoll, 2011; Fiebert & Gonzalez, 1997). In one notable study of 978 young adult women (Fiebert & Gonzalez, 1997), 29% reported to have initiated an assault upon a partner at least once over the previous 5 years. When asked why they did so, 38% responded “I did not believe my actions would hurt my partner”; 19% said “I have found that most men have been trained not to hit a woman, and therefore I am not fearful of retaliation from my partner”; and 24% said “I believe that men can more readily protect themselves, so I don’t worry when I become physically aggressive” (p. 587). In his workbook for female IPV offenders, David Wexler, a well-known treatment provider in Southern California writes:

Often, women rationalize their abusive and/or violent behavior toward their partners because they have experienced themselves as victims and now feel entitled to retaliation. . . . I evaluated one female offender who set fire to her ex-husband’s apartment when he left her—and she considered this to be a completely reasonable response to his injustice. . . . If her expectations about what her partner is supposed to offer her are not met adequately—like providing enough income or giving up his friends or activities to spend his time exclusively with her—an entitled woman may feel completely justified in payback. And, most disturbingly, she may see nothing wrong with this retaliation and control. (Wexler, 2016, p. 13)

Benevolent sexism serves to maintain existing social structures that disadvantage men and women alike. The “women are wonderful” effect assumes of women that they are helpless victims, in effect denying them the sense of agency required for successfully competing with men in a patriarchal society (Bosson et al., 2019; Glick & Fiske, 1999a). These seemingly benign views are endorsed by many men, of course, but likewise by women who find them far more acceptable than the hostile attitudes previously mentioned (Glick et al., 2000; Glick et al., 2004), and may explain the otherwise odd alliance between staunch feminist advocates for battered women and law enforcement, a traditionally male-centered, highly patriarchal system. If women are supposed to be nurturing, accommodating, and suppress anger and aggression, then they cannot be assumed to assault intimate partners, except perhaps to protect themselves, and should not be arrested or otherwise held accountable; and men who are presumed to be strong and in control of their lives, cannot be considered victims. The gender paradigm in IPV policy offers is as good an example as one can find of the adage that “politics makes strange bedfellows.” But efforts to reduce IPV cannot depend on stereotypes. According to Corvo and Johnson (2003):

Those working in the field of domestic violence must be allowed to make good on feminist claims as to the purported value of examining the full range of the problem as it manifests along a variety of dimensions, of recognizing complex and multifactorial etiological processes at work in the perpetuation of the problem, and in rejecting stereotypical characterizations of males as well as females, without either their feminist loyalties or compassion credentials being called into question. (pp. 268–269)

How IPV is viewed through the lens of the gender paradigm, with consequences for law enforcement, public policy, treatment, and research, given the research presented in this article must be regarded as sexist, based on the simple dictionary definition as “prejudice or discrimination based on sex.” Sexism may affect women disproportionately, but not exclusively. In all societies, males are disadvantaged in some ways—for example, conscription into military service, difficulties gaining custody time with their children, working in the most dangerous occupations, and so on (Benatar, 2012; Bosson et al., 2019). Being disproportionately arrested on IPV charges is another.

CONCLUSIONS

The high level of symmetry in IPV should no longer be in dispute; however, IPV is a complex problem, which macro theories based on sexual selection or cultural norms can only partly explain. Researchers today are still trying to determine how these forces interact. If IPV is, as we have shown, a human and not a gendered problem, public policy makers and intervention providers need a clearer understanding of who it affects and how, under what circumstances, and with what sort of consequences, so as to make more informed decision about ways to more efficiently reduce IPV in our communities.

Societal and Individual Power

We have considered how IPV may be affected by macrosystem factors, but through complex, indirect pathways. While some reviews, as previously noted, found the highest rates of MFPV in countries with low levels of women’s gender empowerment, the review by Esquivel-Santovena et al. (2013) failed to find such a correlation; and while Straus’ (2008) International Dating Violence Survey (IDVS) did find a correlation, it applied to both MFPV and FMPV. Furthermore, traditional gender role expectations do not by themselves predict MFPV, but if they are accompanied by proviolent beliefs or poor emotion management skills they may lead to marital conflict which, in turn, may result in a physical assault. Some men endorse sexist beliefs to justify behaviors more parsimoniously explained by a personality disorder. In some cases, it is hard to see any pathway at all. Women in same-sex relationships, who presumably lack the institutional power and privilege afforded to men, nevertheless engage in the highest levels of IPV. Clearly, one must look to personality and relationship factors for more satisfying explanations.

The International Dating Violence Study, cited in an earlier section, contained a measure of dominance, which include questions such as, “I generally have the final say when my partner and I disagree,” and “My partner needs to remember that I am in charge.” In the large majority of countries surveyed, abusive women equally sought to dominate their partner, and dominance by either men or women correlated with IPV perpetration in countries throughout the world (Straus, 2006). Simply because an individual is a member of a social group that collectively wields power does not mean that he or she will share in that power. As pointed out by Felson (2002), a senator’s status in congress means little at home if his wife has a dominant personality, particularly if he needs her more than she needs him—or, in evolutionary terms, if she has higher “mate value.” In any relationship, “the partner who is least interested in continuing the relationship (i.e., the one who has better alternatives and less to lose if the relationship ended) should dictate important decisions made in the relationship . . .” (Simpson, Farrell, Orina, & Rothman, 2015, p. 399), and this principle applies to both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships (Caldwell & Peplau, 1984). As the journalist Patricia Pearson (1997) observed:

On the whole, men do indeed have a more powerful left hook. The problem is that the dynamic of domestic violence is not analogous to two differently weighted boxers in a ring. There are relational strategies and psychological issues at work in an intimate relationship that negate the fact of physical strength. At the heart of the matter lies human will. Which partner—by dint of temperament, personality, life history—has the will to harm the other? (p. 117)

Thus a smaller abuser will use a weapon instead of their fists, and the type of emotional abuse will be tailored to the situation and their victim’s particular vulnerabilities, as when a woman threatens to take custody of the children, or someone in a same-sex relationship threatens to “out” his or her partner or compromise their HIV status (Renzetti, 1992; Zierler et al., 2000). And they will continue to do so because they *can*. Individuals are driven to use IPV depending on their genetic predispositions, personality, childhood learning, in combination with relationship and environmental factors—regardless whether or not their behavior makes sense from an evolutionary standpoint, or whether or not it is culturally sanctioned. The Italian feminist Daniela Bandelli (2017) would drop the term *gender-based violence* altogether, and prefers a “violence is violence” approach, because . . .

. . . It allows explanations outside the interpretive precinct of patriarchal power and at the same time to use analytical categories of sexual difference and gender roles to analyze differences of committing and experiencing violence by men and women. This counter-discourse maintains that women are more mental, indirect, and cause less evident damage, whereas men are more physical, direct and result in more evident injuries . . . This reasoning could enable us to de-politicize gender readings of IPV and DV by stepping outside the gender discourse . . . (p. 158)

Implications for Intervention and Treatment

Human aggression in general, and IPV in particular, may better be understood as biopsychosocial phenomena, as with all human behavior. An example would be cognitive abilities once thought to favor men (Halpern, 2012), where one sex outperforms the other on some specific measures (e.g., verbal skills for women, mental rotation and spatial perception for men), but cognitive abilities are comparable overall, and where within-sex differences are greater than those between groups. Aggression, then, is not necessarily “gendered,” but not always symmetrical, depending on what is measured.

Social Learning and Attachment. Noting the cultural norm of monogamy in most modern societies, the evolutionary psychologist Christine Harris (2003) suggested that “forming and maintaining a deep emotional attachment with a mate might have been a mechanism to increase inclusive fitness for both men and women in a variety of ways” (p. 118). She regarded jealousy not merely as a specific mechanism for preventing mate poaching, but as a more nuanced relationship barometer that detects other relationship threats, such as the feeling that one’s partner does not care about them. In her social cognitive model, how an individual interprets these threats, the emotions they feel (e.g., sadness, anger, or anxiety) and how they respond, varies as a function of cognitive appraisals and what they have learned over the course of childhood and later development. The theory acknowledges the importance of attachment insecurity as well.

Attachment theory and learning theory today provide the best explanatory models for understanding the causes, characteristics and dynamics of IPV, and for guiding evidence-based interventions (Dutton, 2006; Hamel, 2014). Attachment theory, in particular, is highly credible because of its strong biological roots, and it operates on the individual and relationship levels where IPV interventions are most relevant. Studies confirm that IPV perpetrators have higher attachment insecurity compared to their more secure counterparts. Anxiously attached individuals can be clingy, demanding, and pathologically jealous, which can be viewed as attempts of reducing fear of abandonment. Findings from evolutionary psychology are mixed on possible correlations between the dismissing attachment style and mate-guarding behaviors (Levy & Kelly, 2010). Although not as strongly correlated with IPV, attachment avoidance has been determined by IPV researchers to be problematic in certain relationships, as when dismissing individuals react aggressively to their partner’s demands for intimacy (Sonkin, Hamel, Ferreira, Buttell, & Frietas, 2019).

Social Learning Theory and Attachment Theory each explain how children and adolescents become aggressive as adults, whether or not they experienced family violence or other forms of dysfunction (Moretti, DaSilva, & Holland, 2004; Moretti, Penny, Osbuth, & Odgers, 2007). Together, the two theories shed light on why individuals who witness IPV as children are at the same risk of perpetrating IPV themselves as adults regardless of the parent’s sex; and account for sex-specific modeling, as when partner-violent women are more likely to have witnessed their mothers assault their fathers than the other way around (Hendy et al., 2003; White & Humphrey, 1994).

Most importantly, they suggest a host of practical, evidence-based intervention strategies beyond traditional gender role reeducation common among court-mandated perpetrator treatment programs (Babcock et al., 2016), including the teaching of emotion management, communication and conflict-resolution skills and substance abuse awareness, and helping individuals with issues of childhood trauma, mental illness, and relationship dysfunction in modalities other than the psychoeducational group format. Although gender role education may be part of a sound intervention strategy with some men, imposing any such approach risks alienating clients and preventing them from establishing the therapeutic alliance and group engagement required for treatment success (Hamel, 2020). As the founder of the Duluth Model of intervention, an early gendered-type of perpetrator treatment program, Ellen Pence finally eventually conceded that:

By determining that the need or desire for power was the motivating force behind battering, we created a conceptual framework that, in fact, did not fit the lived experience of many of the men and women we were working with. The DAIP staff [. . .] remained undaunted by the difference in our theory and the actual experiences of those we were working with [. . .] It was the cases themselves that created the chink in each of our theoretical suits of armor. Speaking for myself, I found that many of the men I interviewed did not seem to articulate a desire for power over their partner. Although I relentlessly took every opportunity to point out to men in the groups that they were so motivated and merely in denial, the fact that few men ever articulated such a desire went unnoticed by me and many of my coworkers. Eventually, we realized that we were finding what we had already predetermined to find. (Pence, 1999)

Systemic Perspective. As adapted by Dutton (2006), Nested Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) has been useful for distinguishing the various levels in which the risk factors for IPV operate, and how they might interact. From the more distant to the more immediate, these levels are known as the *macrosystem* (gender role expectations, attitudes regarding violence, other large cultural forces), *exosystem* (job and unemployment stress, neighborhood and peer-group violence), *microsystem* (structural and interaction patterns within families), and *ontogenetic*, including one's personality as shaped by one's family of origin. Using this model, in their large Air Force study, Slep, Heyman, and Foran (2014) reported that risk factors at the three levels below the exosystem predicted low-level IPV (situational violence) as well as clinically significant IPV featuring a greater level of injuries and fear (battering), for both men and women. Distant factors must be addressed, but as a practical matter through direct political and social action; it is at two remaining levels that IPV interventions should have the most immediate impact. Evidence-based, gender-inclusive interventions have been available for some time, from those explicitly framed within a systemic approach for work with couples and families (see: Hamel, 2014; Hamel & Nicholls, 2007) to I Cubed Theory (Finkel et al., 2012), an elegant treatment model that organizes risk factors at the individual level, taking into account the provocation (instigation), dispositional factors for aggression (impellance), and

dispositional factors to control aggressive impulses (inhibition). Promising gender-inclusive approaches have been developed for work within the group format (see: Hamel, 2020 for a review).

Sex and Gender Are Not Irrelevant. Alternative explanations to the gender paradigm for the phenomenon that is IPV are based on empirical research findings, rather than political considerations, and research indicates that the construct of gender fails, by itself, to explain IPV dynamics, and contributes minimally to best practice standards of intervention. Still, sex and gender are not irrelevant. We have argued that even outside of the United States and other industrialized Western countries, where women are economically, socially, and politically disempowered, IPV is still primarily a human problem, but these structural inequities have their effects, beyond those of personality, in establishing gender role expectations that can lead to marital conflict. Furthermore, in Western countries many otherwise violence-prone individuals may check their aggressive impulses out of fear of being arrested (Chovanec, 2012); indeed, men who are court-mandated to treatment for an IPV offense drop out significantly less often compared to voluntary clients (Babcock et al., 2016). However, many men who wouldn't act out in United States might feel they can get away with it elsewhere. Although IPV is considered a criminal offense in 87% of the 133 countries surveyed by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2014), violations are weakly enforced, or not enforced at all, in over a third. Researchers do not yet know with any degree of certainty to what extent FMPV is motivated more out of self-defense in some of these countries compared to the United States, where IPV dynamics might very well differ.

In less patriarchal countries, the very same stereotypes that have been used to prop up gender paradigm policies also play a part in how men and women relate to one another. Although not very large, sex differences in verbal and nonverbal communication and the processing of emotion cannot be ignored (Brody & Hall, 2008; Hall & Matsumoto, 2004; LaFrance & Vial, 2016; Thompson, & Voyer, 2014, Wood, 2015), because they can reinforce common stereotypes, and fuel relationship conflicts (Hamel, 2020; Tannen, 1990). Treatment providers are well advised to address them:

Ignorance of those differences can lead to the toxic kinds of gender stereotypes mentioned above and unnecessarily create relationship discord. For example, while emotions are experienced at comparable rates between the sexes, women more readily remember emotion-laden situations which men may view as evidence of malicious resentment or pickiness. In fact, women do experience anger for longer periods, but also are more likely than men to feel ashamed about it. Because they are more likely to report intense emotions, and due to higher levels of emotion recognition and empathy, women can be dismissed as “more emotional” or “irrational,” thus making them feel unimportant.

Additionally, compared to men, women are better at decoding non-verbal expressions of emotion, and using emotions to understand situations and facilitate solutions to conflicts. This is a great quality but may be threatening to some men who view it as an attempt to dominate and control them. On the other

hand, the difficulty that many men have in expressing emotions, especially those that make them feel vulnerable (e.g., hurt, helplessness), may be interpreted as “not caring.” Similar gender-based misunderstandings have been pointed out by Tannen (1990)—for example, how men tend to value autonomy and being competent more than emotional connection and intimacy, whereas women place a higher value on connection and intimacy; or how men typically engage in *report talk* (to exchange information), whereas women engage in *rapport talk* (to make a connection). Needless to say, while these are traditional patterns are quite common, gender roles vary widely, and particularly with respect to sexual orientation. (Hamel, 2020, p. 216)

The Way Forward

The consequences of IPV are greater for women than for men, in terms of serious, life-threatening injuries and mental health problems. On average, men are bigger and stronger, and more capable of defending themselves. IPV is not entirely symmetrical between the sexes.

The research evidence, however, also indicates that the differences that do exist are relative, not absolute. Being physically assaulted by one’s partner, like having your car broken into, is a crime, a gross violation of personal boundaries, and emotionally damaging, regardless of how many items were stolen. Psychological abuse, far more prevalent than physical assaults, are rated by male and female victims alike as usually more damaging, and its impact does not depend on size and strength. We have seen how family violence, experienced or witnessed, has long-term consequences on children regardless of the parent’s sex, and transmits abuse patterns from one generation to the next. Children don’t care about politics, and are indifferent to arcane academic debates on who is the greater “victim”; they just want the abuse and dysfunction to stop. In a fully egalitarian society, everyone should be given a right to succeed—and to fail—and everyone should be held responsible for their behavior, but also provided a chance to correct it. More than 25 years ago, Reena Sommer made the following observation:

As a woman who is deeply concerned about the well-being of all women, I cannot help being frustrated by attempts to resolve the abuse that many women suffer by turning a blind eye to other women who inflict serious physical and emotional abuse on their loved ones. By denying this aspect of many women’s existence, we do little to help women cope with life’s stressors, or assist them in building more satisfactory intimate relationships. In our efforts to improve the lives of all women, it is incumbent upon us to see all aspects of their reality. Even more damaging to the image of women is the self-imposed label of victim. In doing so, we deny ourselves the empowerment that we have long strived toward. As long as women subscribe to the notion of universal victimhood, they will never experience the freedom that goes along with having control over their lives. (Sommer, 1995, p. 3)

For IPV policy to reflect both the empirical research base and feminist principles, major institutional reforms will be required, long known but not always effectively promoted, including changes to current mandatory arrest policies and one-size-fits-all treatment models that do not differentiate between situational violence and intimate terrorism (Hamel & Russell, in preparation). Shelters will, and should, primarily help female victims, given their greater vulnerability to life-threatening injuries, but there is no reason why they should not reach out to male victims, rather than pretend that this population doesn't exist. A good start, as some have suggested, would be to change the VAWA name to something like the Violence Against Partners Act, and avoid use of the pronoun "he" when referring to perpetrators and "she" when designating victims (Cook, 2009). Still, gender-neutral language on advocacy websites is not enough; pictures, it is said, are worth a thousand words, and today few, if any shelter websites contain pictures of abused men. Crucially, intervention policies will need to be determined by a broader coalition of stakeholders than battered women advocates and their political allies, with IPV researchers, batterer intervention providers, mental health professionals, defense attorneys, and others allowed a seat at the policy table, so their experiences and expertise can be fully shared.

NOTE

1. Due, one might add, to the human proclivity to cognitive biases such as the availability and representativeness heuristics (Gilovich, Griffin, & Kahneman, 2002).

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