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Men's Violence toward Women Is the Serious Social Problem

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Our purpose in this chapter is to summarize, from a feminist perspective, differences in the two most important approaches to violence in heterosexual, marriage-type relationships. The *feminist* theoretical framework argues that violence must be located within the *gendered* context of men's and women's lives. Understanding violence as a gendered phenomenon leads to a focus on the problems of *violence against women*. In contrast, the *family conflict* approach (Straus, this volume) believes it is important to examine all violent behavior and argues that there is gender symmetry in the use of violence. In this chapter, we argue that the violence against women approach is best suited to understanding violence in heterosexual relationships.

Our task in this chapter is difficult for three reasons. First, when Straus is the spokesperson, major components of feminist theorizing can appear to be included in the family conflict perspective. Although Straus's inclusions of feminist understandings cannot easily be typified because they have changed over time (see Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1993), he repeatedly has reminded his readers that men's violence creates more injuries than does women's violence, and that it is important to focus public attention on the problems faced by women victims. While these are central feminist understandings, we believe that the family conflict perspective is not feminist because it does not incorporate gender at the level of measurement, nor does it conceptualize violence as a gendered phenomenon.

Second, it is difficult to argue with Straus because we often agree with him. In particular, we do *not* dispute that more than 100 empirical studies using the research instrument called the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) consistently support the conclusions that women use as much violence as do men (see Kimmel, 2002, for a review of these studies). Because we do not dispute these findings, Straus's repeated claim that we are guilty of "suppressing evidence" about women's violence is *not* true. We also agree with him that the world would be a better place if there was no violence, that it is important to understand women's use of violence, and that it is nonsense to ignore women's use of violence while condemning violence by men. Yet even though we agree with Straus that women as well as men use violence, we dispute his characterizations of women's typical violence as motivated by their desire to "slap the cad." Such a characterization trivializes the complex meaning of violence and its impact on the lives of women. Furthermore, we are wary of the political implications of describing women's and men's violence as equivalent or symmetrical.

Third, and critically, our debate with Straus is difficult because he implicitly claims both more scientific expertise as well as a higher moral ground than feminist researchers. First, he claims greater scientific expertise when he characterizes the family conflict perspective as "scientific" while feminism is "advocacy" (Straus, 1999). We do not wish to engage in debate about the validity of feminist methodological assumptions and practices. We note only that feminist approaches to research have gained a prominent place among accepted research methodologies (see, for example, Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Reinharz, 1992). Second, Straus claims the moral high ground by referencing his goal of eliminating

all violence, while feminism is concerned “only” with eliminating violence against women. We also are concerned with eliminating all violence, yet as we argue in this chapter, research emphasizing women’s violence toward men is used as a justification to deny the seriousness of violence against women as well as to take resources away from battered women. Straus is aware of this and states in his chapter that “I am willing to accept the cost . . . because there is no way of avoiding it without suppressing the evidence on female violence.” Perhaps *he* is willing to accept these consequences and perhaps *he* evaluates these as “bearable costs,” yet *he* is not the one suffering the consequences. The very practical costs of advocating for *his* moral agenda are not experienced by *him*—they are experienced by real women victims of abuse.

Our argument proceeds in three parts. First, our comments focus on the family conflict perspective emphasis on how women’s and men’s use of violence is equivalent. Therefore, we examine the research methodologies leading to this claim. We do this briefly, because our goal is *not* to deny women’s violence, *nor* is it to “suppress evidence,” as Straus claims. Rather, we wish to challenge the claim that women’s and men’s use of violence is equivalent in sheer *counts* of violent acts. Second, we turn to a feminist theorizing of violence in order to argue that violence cannot be conceptualized as equivalent in terms of its *contexts, meanings, or consequences*. We conclude by addressing how the family conflict perspective is a political discourse used to disenfranchise women in general, and individual battered women in particular.

❖ EXAMINING RESEARCH PRODUCING GENDER SYMMETRY

Careful examinations of academic research spanning three decades does not yield a consistent picture of similarities or differences between women’s and men’s use of violence. Research on this topic is riddled with disagreements (see Kimmel, 2002, for a review of these issues). And, as Straus notes, different types of samples, even different types of question wording, produce vastly different data. Here we focus on exploring characteristics of the Conflicts Tactics Scale (CTS) and its administration. Developed by Straus and his colleagues, this research instrument is critical for two reasons.

First, the CTS is by far the most common research instrument used to study large, nationally representative samples that are the "gold standard" of scientific research. The CTS is a simple checklist of behaviors asking respondents to indicate whether or not they or their partners have used or have been the recipient of specific violent acts such as "slap," "push," and "shove" (classified on the CTS as "minor" assaults because they are not *statistically* associated with creating injury), or acts such as "kick," "throw something," or "choke" (classified on the CTS as "abusive" or "severe" assaults because such behaviors are *statistically* associated with creating injury). The ease and quickness of administering the CTS are important because they make it ideal for large-scale research: Responding to the survey does not take long, and results (presence or absence of particular behaviors) are easily tabulated.

Second, and most critically for our purposes here, the CTS is important because, without exception, *all* research using the CTS finds that women's and men's rates of violence are more or less equivalent. And, with few exceptions, *only* research using the CTS yields such images of gender similarity. There is something special about the CTS, or the way it is administered, that constructs a view of the world not found through the feminist research methodology of in-depth interviewing that invariably finds women to be the overwhelming victims of violence.

Data gathered through the CTS that promote an image of gender equivalence in the use of violence are troublesome to feminists who want the public to remain focused on the problems of men's violence toward women, which causes far more harm and injury than does women's violence toward men. Given this, it is not surprising that there have been myriad critiques of the CTS (see, for example, Kimmel, 2002; Saunders, 2002; Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Neidig, & Thorn, 1995; Brush, 1990). Here we summarize only those characteristics of the CTS and its administration that lead to findings of gender equivalence in the use of violence.

- A basic lesson in research methodology surrounding research on family violence (or violence of any type) is that representative samples of the general population will not yield data showing a large amount of extreme violence, because, no matter how troublesome such violence is, extreme violence is not statistically common. This is a primary reason that CTS studies sampling the general population find so little extreme violence. The CTS also likely underestimates extreme violence in the general population because of the problem of "refusals

to participate." When asked if they will participate in a survey, some people will decline. Survey results are not challenged if these refusals are random. Yet refusals to participate in the CTS survey likely are *not* random. Researchers from any perspective agree that it is overwhelmingly women who experience extreme violence, and, among cohabiting couples, abused women are much less likely than are non-abused women to agree to participate in general surveys about violence (Waltermaurer, Ortega, & McNutt, 2003). Given this, research based on representative samples will *underestimate* the amount of extreme violence experienced by women because severely abused women will not participate in the survey.

- There also is a likely gendered systematic reporting bias influencing CTS findings. In this volume, Straus notes the indications that men tend to *underestimate* their own use of violence. He attempts to control for this by examining only reports from women. Yet this does not correct the bias, because women *also* tend to underestimate men's use of violence. Furthermore, men and women alike tend to *overestimate* women's use of violence. Violence by men is expected, so it is not reported; violence by women is not expected, so it *is* notable and reported (Currie, 1998; also: Dobash et al., 1992; Kimmel, 2002; and Schafer, Caetano, & Clark, 2002). Given this, whether men *or* women are asked about their own *or* about their partner's violence, there will be a tendency for the CTS to *overestimate* violence done by *women* and *underestimate* violence done by *men*.

- Because the major CTS samples include only cohabiting couples, this research has missed violence by *former* partners. Violence by former partners is not symmetrical: men are the aggressors in more than 90 percent of assaults involving former spouses (U.S. Department of Justice, 1998); National Crime Victimization Studies show that violence against separated women might be more than 8 times higher than rates for married women (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995). Again, the CTS *underestimates* violence experienced by women.

- Respondents must trust interviewers before they will talk about highly stigmatized and traumatic experiences such as assault (Brush, 1990; Schwartz, 2000). Yet in CTS surveys, respondents are asked only whether or not specific behaviors have occurred. Given that women are overwhelmingly the victims of extreme violence, and given that administering the CTS does not allow respondents to develop trust or rapport with interviewers, the CTS will *underestimate* extreme violence experienced by women.

- In any version, the CTS contains a simple—and short—checklist of behaviors. Only in its most recent version has it included the behavior of “sexual assault” or “sexual coercion.” This is important, because there is little disagreement that women are the overwhelming victims of such assaults. Indeed, national studies indicate that women might be 20 times more likely than men to be victims of sexual assault (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Given this, the CTS *underestimates* violence experienced overwhelmingly by women.

Combined, these various characteristics of the CTS and its administration serve to overestimate the violence done by women while underestimating the violence done by men.

❖ THE GENDERED CONTEXTS, MEANINGS, AND CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE

If such biases could be corrected, the CTS likely would measure *more* violence by *men* and *less* violence by *women* and hence, the rates of men's and women's violence no longer would seem so symmetrical. Yet certainly, CTS data still would show considerable violence by women. We continue to our next question: Is violence done by women the same as violence done by men? We move to a feminist perspective, with its primary belief that violence must be examined as a gendered phenomenon that is only understood when placed within the context of current male and female social positions in our society. We argue that when violence is examined in this way, it is not equivalent: It occurs within different contexts and has different meanings and consequences for women and for men.

The Gendered Context of Violence

Men's violence toward women and women's violence toward men are not the same, because these acts occur within the historical, cultural, political, economic, and psychological contexts of *gender*. Gender—views of proper roles and relationships for men and women—is a basic organizing principle for institutions and for the distribution of resources. Despite considerable social change in recent years, gender remains the overriding context of violence that cannot be ignored or trivialized.

This gendered context includes the history of tolerance of men's violence toward women (see Dobash & Dobash, 1979, for a review) that continues to be taught and reinforced in social institutions such as sports (Messner, 1989) and fraternities (Sanday, 1991). It includes the normalization of violence against women in heterosexual romantic relationships (Wood, 2001).

Notwithstanding considerable social change, our world remains separated into two spheres, each gender identified. The public sphere of work is associated with men and is valued more highly than the private sphere of family, which is associated with women. Of course, *Leave It to Beaver* families of the 1950s, where men went off to work and women stayed home, are increasingly rare. Many, indeed most, women now are employed. Yet despite changes, the gendered core of work and family remains and promotes gender inequality.

Consider how gender permeates women's employment. True, many women now are employed, yet more women than men are employed part-time rather than full-time, and far more women than men take time out of the labor force in order to dedicate themselves to their families (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000). While many women want to do this, this choice means that they have less income than their male partners as well as less job security and seniority. Gender inequality also explains differences in women's and men's median weekly earnings: Women who worked full-time in 2000 earned an average of \$491 per week while men earned \$647 (U.S. Statistical Abstracts, 2001). Women's work is devalued: a college degree in engineering, a field dominated by men, leads to much higher average pay than a college degree in social work or education, fields dominated by women. As a result, it is far more common for women to be economically dependent on their male partners than for men to be economically dependent on their female partners. Unfortunately, all too many women make a decision to stay in violent relationships because they cannot support themselves and their children without the abuser's income.

While women have become far more active in the labor force, men have become more active family members. Since the mid-1960s, married men have more than doubled the average number of hours each week they spend doing household chores or child tending. Yet men's average of 9.8 hours a week remains less than half of married women's average of 19.5 hours a week. The division of labor inside households is not gender equivalent (Bianchi & Spain, 1996).

While the consequences of gender can sometimes be measured in terms of dollars earned or hours of housework done, much of the gendered meaning of social life is immeasurable because it is so deeply woven into the identities and the everyday lives of women and men. Despite social change, women and men are socialized differently, have different expectations for themselves and for their partners, and often think about the world differently. Consider, for example, common patterns in partner selection. Statistically, most couples are people with similar levels of education and of similar ages, but when there are differences, it is likely that the man will have more education and/or be older than his partner. Because education and age are associated with economic advantage, patterns of partner selection can bring gender inequality into individual homes. Likewise, on a couple-by-couple basis, women and men continue conventional patterns of partner selection, with men choosing women partners who are smaller than they are and women choosing men who are taller and heavier than they are. On the average, then, men have a physical advantage over their female partners. The gendered nature of modern family life is perhaps the most obvious in parenting. While many men now are more actively engaged fathers than in the past, neither men or women think of "mothering" and "fathering" as similar. Fathering is something men do along with other things in their lives, mothering is something that often is an all-encompassing identity and set of responsibilities for women (Walzer, 1998).

To summarize, what happens inside homes, and the meaning of what happens inside homes, is different for women and for men. The gendered nature of coupling leads to the typical situation in which the woman has less income than her partner, he is bigger than she is, and she is more involved, in time as well as in psychological commitment, with her children and household than he is. These gendered characteristics of family life influence how women and men think about violence, how they can think about the possibilities of eliminating the violence or of "leaving home." We see the world through the lens of gender, and this is the context for violence.

The Gendered Meanings of Violence

Not surprisingly, given the gendered contexts of all social life, violence has typical gendered differences both in why it is used as well as in what it means to be a victim.

Why do people use violence? For certain acts of violence—those clustered at the lower end of violence severity, such as pushes, shoves, and slaps—the *rates* of women's and men's use of violence appear similar. However, it is critical to examine the *motives* for these acts. While both women and men use violence to express anger (see Kimmel, 2002, for further discussion), as compared to men, many more women say they use violence in self-defense (Dasgupta, 1999, 2002). In contrast, men rarely say they use violence in self-defense. As compared to women, men are far more likely to say they use violence in order to intimidate, coerce, or punish unwanted behavior. Much more so than for women, men's violence is about perceived challenges to their authority, honor, and self-esteem (see Saunders, 2002; Dasgupta, 1999; and Dobash et al., 1992, for references).

Motives for using violence are gendered. There also is a question about the meaning of violence experienced: What does it mean to be assaulted by a partner? Here again, there is little gender equivalence. The meaning of violence for women is *fear* (Cascardi, O'Leary, Lawrence, & Schlee, 1995). Many women—but not many men—who have experienced violence report fear (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 1995). This meaning of violence as fear reflects women's perceptions of violence as male control. Rather than a "conflict tactic," implying mutuality of disagreements, or as "expressive violence" implying emotional upset, violence can be perceived by women as a tactic to control them. Indeed, it is not just women who perceive violence as a means of male control. Interviews with men who use violence show the distressing finding that men often believe they are *justified* in their use of violence; they believe it is their "right" as a man, particularly when their wives do not conform to their ideal of the "good wife" (Adams, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

Violence used as self-defense is a complex topic, because it brings together motives for doing violence as well as the experiences of victimization. In her interview study of a random sample of divorced mothers, Kurz (1995) explored women's use of violence. Three-quarters of the women who experienced violence reported they used some type of violence—primarily the less severe forms—themselves. When women noted their own acts of violence, the interviewer would make statements such as "You seem to be describing mutual violence; he was violent and you were violent." Almost all women replied that they did *not* view the violence as mutual; rather, they understood their violence as being used in self-defense. Consider the responses of two of these women:

Respondent: My husband did all those things on your list except use a gun. I did the first two—I threw something at him and I pushed him.

Interviewer: So, your violence was the same as his?

Respondent: I used violence to protect myself when he came after me. (33-year-old woman, married 7 years, 1 child)

Respondent: He did all those things on your list. . . . I did all those things, too.

Interviewer: So why did you do these things? You were angry at him?

Respondent: I'm not a violent person. It was because he was violent. I had to protect myself. (29-year-old woman, married 8 years, 4 children)

In its most narrow legal sense, "self-defense" applies only when a person uses violence in order to protect against an immediate *physical* threat. Straus uses this narrow definition: he argues that women's violence is not in self-defense when women—and not their partners—use physical violence. Yet self-defense as a legal category often includes more than responding to an immediate physical threat (see Osthoff & Maguigan, this volume). Subjective evaluations of imminent threat are complex and inextricably related to the experience of prior abuse. Many studies of battered women show that, within the context of ongoing abuse, a verbal threat of more violence is very real. While Straus argues that such violence only leads to greater violence, it is morally troublesome to criticize women for responding to cues they have painfully learned signal an imminent assault (Kurz, 1993).

This gendered meaning of the use of violence is also necessary to understand women's use of lethal force. The U.S. Bureau of Justice (Langan & Dawson, 1995) conducted a study of 540 spouse abuse murder defendants in the United States. In sheer count, there was not a remarkable gendered difference—men committed 59 percent of these homicides and women committed 41 percent. Yet the picture of near-gender equivalence stops after noting simple counts. Only 10 percent of male defendants—but 44 percent of female defendants—had been assaulted by their spouses at or around the time of the murder. Other examinations of homicide reports show that homicides by women—but not by men—typically occur after a long period of

abuse or during a violent assault (see Saunders, 2002, for a review of these studies).

The Gendered Consequences of Violence

While there are multiple consequences to violence, the most obvious is physical injury. In his chapter, Straus spends considerable time offering evidence for his conclusion that women's violence creates injury. We do not dispute his evidence, nor do we believe that men's injuries should be denied or ignored. Our argument is that—whether intended or not—emphasizing how women's violence can create injuries diverts attention from the main message: *All* researchers agree that women experience far *more* injuries, and far more *serious* injuries from violence than do men.

Families are, statistically speaking, very dangerous places for women but not for men: more than 40 percent of women's hospital emergency room visits arising from intentional violence were caused by their male intimates; violence by intimates caused fewer than 5 percent of visits by men (Greenfield et al., 1998); for every 1 man hospitalized for spousal assault, 46 women are hospitalized (Straton, 1994). When attention is focused on the most severe assaults—those coming to the attention of police—gender differences are the most striking: Rarely are men injured (see Saunders, 2002, for a review of injury studies).

Other consequences of violence are also gendered. For example, women report nearly double the problems of psychosomatic symptoms, stress, and depression than do men who have experienced an equivalent "level" of violence (as measured by the CTS). Likewise, clinical samples of people experiencing severe violence show much higher levels of psychological trauma and depression in women than in men (see Saunders, 2002, for a review of these studies).

In summary, within the feminist perspective, violence by men and by women are *not* the same: statistical counts of behaviors are meaningless unless they are understood in relation to their contexts, consequences, and meanings. From a feminist stance, the family conflict perspective *degenders the problem* and *genders the blame* (Berns, 2001). Simple counts of behaviors degender the problem: women's violence and men's violence are conceptualized as the same. Arguing that women's violence toward men creates men's violence toward women genders the blame: battered women are held responsible for the violence they experience.

Academic debates of any type often involve disagreements about proper research methodologies as well as differences in theoretical perspectives. The topic for this chapter so far has been one such academic debate. Now we move outside the world of academia, where research has practical consequences.

❖ FAMILY CONFLICT RESEARCH AND POLITICAL REALITIES

When research leaves the pages of academic journals and enters the ongoing world, it no longer focuses on debates about research methodology or appropriate theoretical approaches; most often it does not carry with it the hesitant language and often subtle distinctions made by academic researchers. In his chapter on women's violence toward men, Straus (this volume) offers an academic presentation and supports his arguments with a blizzard of statistics. Yet many of his readers likely will breeze through the statistics, ignore his disclaimers, and remember only four points: Women are as violent as men, women's violence creates injuries, women's violence toward men causes men's violence toward women, and women's violence must stop. These are the simple messages that have entered the public world. Just as feminist research led to increased public sympathy and added resources for battered women, family conflict research is used to blame women and reduce resources.

Family Conflict Perspectives, the Structure of Public Concern, and Victim Blaming

Of the many troubles people face, only some become matters of public attention. For example, why is there no general concern about the multiple problems faced by prostitutes? Or, why do people often ask rape victims questions such as "Where were you?" or "What were you wearing?" These examples show aspects of the very complicated logic surrounding how Americans in general think about problems and the people who have them. Although the details are complicated (see Loseke, 2003), the general theme is clear: In practice, many Americans do not take problems seriously unless they believe the people suffering these problems are "pure victims," people who are in no way responsible for their plights.

Because of this cultural logic, "North Americans are only interested in charity for the deserving, and violent women are not seen as deserving" (Schwartz, 2000, p. 817). Thus, research portraying women as "equally violent" as men reduces public sympathy for women victims. It is no wonder that advocates for abused women have a difficult time talking about women's violence:

It has been extremely difficult . . . to talk about women's use of violence. These discussions quickly careen off into polemics about women being as violent or more violent than men, women's "participating in" or "provoking" their own victimization, and women not being "good" (or pure) victims, or even being victims at all. (Bible, Dasgupta, & Osthoff, 2002, p. 1269)

This cultural logic influencing what Americans worry about and take seriously is consequential for public images of battered women in general, and for individual battered women in particular. Research shows, for example, that judges and juries will not take women's victimization seriously if women have *any* history of violence (Ferraro, 2003). This reflects attitudes of the public in general who lose sympathy for battered women when they believe these women are even verbally assertive (Follingstad, Brondino, & Kleinfelter, 1996; Harris & Cook, 1994).

In their scholarly articles, family conflict researchers often argue that evidence of women's violence against men should not be used to excuse men's violence toward women. Yet their findings *are* used that way. Because it places such emphasis on women's violence, the family conflict perspective provides rhetorical support for judges and juries who acquit rapists and wife beaters with the justification that rape victims and battered women have provoked their own victimization, and that men therefore are not responsible. The family conflict perspective also provides rhetorical support for members of the public who will not offer sympathy or assistance to any woman evaluated as less than a "pure" victim. In the conclusion to his chapter, Straus recognizes this but states that *he* is "willing to accept certain costs to achieve a non-violent society." We note only that *he* is not experiencing such costs.

Family Conflict Perspectives, Public Policy, and Social Resources

Family conflict researchers also argue that their findings of gender equivalence should not be used to justify taking resources away from

battered women. Yet findings from these studies *are* used to achieve this purpose. In New Hampshire, for example, family conflict study findings were used to justify reducing resources for a women's shelter. Likewise, funding for a women's shelter in Chicago was blocked by referencing findings about women's violence (Currie, 1998).

Family conflict research also serves an important function for a variety of men's rights advocacy groups. The Men's Defense Association (www.mensdefense.org), for example, filed a lawsuit in June 2003, seeking to overturn the Minnesota Battered Woman's Act. Entered into the legal record were manuscripts from family conflict researchers. The logic of the litigation is that because such research by what they term the "best experts" shows that women are as violent as men, it is discriminatory to protect only women. Is the purpose of this lawsuit to shift resources to battered men? No, the suit explicitly states that it does *not* want resources to shift to men. The Men's Defense Association wants to achieve equality by reducing resources for women. Family conflict research is offered as a "scientific" justification to roll back protections for battered women.

Other men's rights advocacy groups use family conflict research to justify demands to reduce men's requirements to pay child support (www.mens-network.org) and to eliminate laws defining marital rape as a crime (the Equal Justice Foundation: www.ejfi.org). While again, Straus says *he* is "willing to accept the cost of radical male advocacy groups misusing the results of my research," any successes of these groups will not affect *him*. It is easy to accept costs when they are suffered by others.

❖ CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we compared feminist and family conflict perspectives on violence between men and women in marital-type relationships. From a feminist perspective, focusing on the dire problems of battered women, the family conflict perspective *decenters the problem* of violence when it conceptualizes men's violence and women's violence as equivalent. In contrast, feminists argue that men's violence and women's violence differs in its contexts, its consequences, and its meanings. Because a great deal of women's violence is in self-defense, focusing on women's violence and training women that "no violence is allowed" have troublesome implications. Furthermore, the assertion that "women's violence creates men's violence" *genders the blame* for violence: battered women become

responsible for their own victimization. Within our cultural logic, if a woman is responsible she does not deserve sympathy and services.

Should women's violence toward men be ignored? Of course not. Should we deny that men, too, can be victims? Definitely not. However, we repeat what feminists have been saying for many years: Talking about "gender equivalence," equating women's and men's use of violence, and dramatizing women's violence quickly leads to polemics in which women's violence is used to justify men's violence, women are evaluated as not deserving of sympathy or support, and services for battered women are reduced. Thus, it is critical that we base our research on a thorough understanding of the gendered dynamics of control, self-defense, and power in male-female relationships. It is only through a gender perspective that we can accurately identify the causes and consequences of violence and develop effective strategies for reducing the unacceptably high rates of violence toward women and the toll this violence takes on women and their families.

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