



Men as Victims of Domestic Violence *

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We must be open to our own blinkers and refuse to simplify the complexities of our findings, even if this means we ask questions that might be uncomfortable (Stanko 1997, cited in Atmore 2001, p. 13).

Introduction

Responding to domestic violence effectively requires an analysis of domestic violence that incorporates gender. This has been essential to naming violence and being clear about the causes of violence and who is responsible for abuse largely targeted at women and their children. Much data have been collected that confirms that women, in the overwhelming majority of cases, are the victims of violence from a partner (Egger 1995). An emerging question raised within the field is, “What about the men who are also victims of domestic violence?” To date there is little statistical data recording men as victims, either within Australia or overseas. This paper examines the available data about male victims of domestic violence. It also discusses what is known about men’s experiences of domestic violence and the implications for service providers.

Elizabeth Stanko’s words at the start of this paper encapsulate the tension about this important issue. On the one hand, some argue that there has been a reluctance to address and acknowledge men’s victimisation for fear that it may take away from the acknowledgement of the seriousness of violence and abuse experienced by women.

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This often goes hand-in-hand with concerns that acknowledging men as victims will direct funds away from the stretched resources currently available to women and children who experience domestic violence. On the other hand, men's rights groups have argued that bias exists against men as victims and accordingly they have sought to emphasise any research that strengthens their position, often arguing that men are victimised as frequently as women in intimate relationships. Unfortunately, this situation has contributed to a highly politicised and adversarial context in which men and women's experiences of violence are placed in competition with each other. In fact, the development of effective responses will be based on a better understanding of the complexities of each form of victimisation.

What do we know about incidence?

Although men are hit by their wives, figures on husband abuse vary too widely to determine the exact extent or seriousness of the problem (Stark & Flitcraft, 1998, cited in Atmore 2001, p. 48). Workers in the field have reported increasing numbers of men approaching services for support in dealing with abuse from a partner. However, evidence concerning victimisation rates remains largely anecdotal and is not represented in formal research data. There are a number of reasons for this which include:

- Men are sometimes not the targets of data collection efforts.
- In some surveys, the incidence of domestic violence against men has been very low, precluding statistical analysis. For example, in one of the most comprehensive Australian studies of the incidence of domestic violence, Ferrante *et al.* (1996) conducted a telephone survey of Perth residents over 18 years of age. The survey asked both men and women a series of questions about robbery, personal attack, threats of force and sexual assault. The sample comprised 1,511 males, three of whom reported single incidents of domestic violence against them. However, the researchers were dubious about the recalling of these events and state 'there is evidence that two of the men may have been witness to an incident or involved in an incident with someone else's partner' (Ferrante *et al.* 1996, p. 63). The small number of incidents precluded further analysis.

- General surveys report that men have better health outcomes and higher incomes than their female counterparts. This may indicate that some men have more resources available to them, enabling them to leave an abusive relationship at an earlier stage and before more serious abuse occurs.

A further problem for researching the incidence of violence perpetrated against men is that it can be difficult to differentiate men who are perpetrating violence from male victims. For example, Gadd *et al.* (2002) conducted in-depth interviews with 22 men who had disclosed experiences of threats or force by a partner in the 2000 Scottish Crime Survey. In some cases, the men's depictions of themselves as victims of domestic violence were not compatible with details of the abuse that they had described. The researchers consequently categorised the men into four groups: primary instigators (n = 1), equal combatants (n = 4), retaliators (n = 8) and non-retaliatory victims (n = 9). The researchers reported that: '...our suspicion was that at least half of the partners of the men who had experienced some form of abuse or threat would also have been able to offer accounts of repeat domestic violence perpetrated against themselves...Differentiating perpetrators from victims in these cases is an irreconcilably contentious task' (Gadd *et al.* 2002, p. 44). Nevertheless, for half the sample, the researchers found the men's account of victimisation '...less controvertible... Some of the interviewees had experienced genuinely harrowing forms of abuse' (Gadd *et al.* 2002, p. 45).

Claims are often made about the inaccuracy of data on the incidence of men as victims of domestic violence. It is commonly argued that men's under-reporting of violence is due to barriers such as embarrassment. Whilst there is no doubt that there are some truths to this, women also under-report violence for reasons such as fear of reprisals, fear that children will be taken away, and a hope that their partner will change. It is documented that female victims under-report their victimisation and the evidence is that men tend to over-estimate their partner's violence while women under-estimate their partner's violence by normalising or excusing it (Flood 2003, p. 4). Men also tend to under-estimate their own violence while women tend to over-estimate theirs (Kimmel 2001, pp. 10-11). Currie (1998) also found that men upgraded women's violent behaviour while women discounted or downplayed their male partner's violence. Nevertheless, female violence towards a male partner is an area that requires further attention.

What data has been recorded in Australia?

Western Australia

According to a review of police statistics, Ferrante et al. (1996, p. 47) report that domestic violence constituted 19.3 per cent of all forms of violence against females and 1.5 per cent of violence against men. However, this did not indicate if the violence perpetrated against the male victims had been from a male or female partner.

Victorian hospital data

Some 1.3 per cent of female and 0.4 per cent of male Emergency Department presentations are the result of an injury inflicted by a partner (Atmore 2002, p. 6). This also did not look at whether the injuries of male victims were inflicted by a male or female partner.

South Australian Phone-In

This study involved a state-wide phone-in over two days and focus group interviews. The phone-in invited callers to talk about the experiences and needs of people who are in abusive or hurtful relationships. Fourteen per cent of callers were male, of whom three per cent identified as perpetrators of domestic violence. As this was a self-identifying phone-in, it was not a measure of the prevalence rate (Flood, p.2). In a finding similar to those of the Scottish research already discussed, the authors state that 'although men did identify as victims of violence, there are strong indications in the statements they make that they have been defined by others as perpetrators of domestic violence and can be characterised as violent' (Bagshaw et al. 2000a, p.78). This highlights the 'blur' that sometimes exists between men as 'victims' and/or 'perpetrators'.

Gay men and intimate partner violence

Whilst little has been recorded for men subjected to violence and abuse in heterosexual relationships, even less has been written in relation to abuse in same-sex relationships. There are great variations between studies reporting on the

incidence of violence within same-sex relationships, from 15-20 per cent (Vickers 1996) to up to 25 per cent (McQuarrie 1995). A study conducted by the NSW Police Service at Mardi Gras Fair Day 1994 found that 5 per cent of gay men responding to the survey disclosed that they had experienced violence within the previous 12 months. However, gay men reported lower levels of fear of sexual assault or domestic violence than lesbians.

It is important to highlight that the literature about gay men's experiences of abuse by a partner describes additional forms of abuse not experienced by heterosexual men (Vickers 1996). Namely, abuse of gay men may entail being ostracised from the gay community and experiencing 'outing' or threats of 'outing' of their sexual preference or HIV status by their partner. These are powerful forms of emotional and social abuse and are part of the tactics used to control and demean.

Nature of violence and abuse experienced by men in heterosexual relationships

There is no doubt that some men subjected to domestic violence from a partner will experience serious abuse that is life threatening and likely to have a long-lasting impact. However, research collected to date indicates very different experiences of victimisation reported by men and women within a domestic violence context. Bagshaw and Chung (2000, p. 11) conducted a review of the available literature and found the following differences:

- Males reported that they were not living in an ongoing state of fear from the perpetrator;
- Males did not have prior experiences of violent relationships; and,
- Males rarely experienced post-separation violence and, in the one reported case, it was far less severe than in male-to-female violence.

Male respondents of the Scottish Crime Survey 2000, in general, were less likely to have been repeat victims of assault, to have been seriously injured, and to report feeling fearful in their own homes. These factors, coupled with the embarrassment many male victims felt, helped to explain the infrequency with which male victims of domestic abuse came to the attention of the Scottish Police (Gadd *et al.* 2002, p. vi).

As is the case with women experiencing domestic violence, it is important to understand the context of their experiences. For example, the interaction of other factors such as sexual preference, cultural background, or class is relevant, especially in their relationship to male notions of masculinity. Atmore (2000, p. 12) cites a recent study conducted in Victoria by Amanda Barclay who interviewed 14 workers from a range of victim services in Melbourne about their views of the experiences and needs of male victims of violence by their female partners. The case studies identified by Barclay highlight that men's experiences are broad and not primarily limited to forms of physical abuse. This is understandable, as men's physical size and strength is often greater than that of their female partners. This may also explain why men often report that they do not generally live in fear of their partners. Men's descriptions about their abuse identified within the Barclay study tended to centre on issues such as financial dependence on a partner, limiting access to resources, tactics of isolation, preventing access to children, and being exposed to irrational and threatening behaviour when their partner was not compliant with medication.

The South Australian study (Bagshaw *et al.* 2000), referred to earlier, also collected qualitative data about men's experiences. Men reported a range of physical abuse including direct assaults, being spat at, scratched, hair pulled, pots thrown, being rushed at, kicked, choked and threatened with a knife. They did not report sexual assaults from their partner but, rather, emotional taunts that had an effect on their sexual performance. Further verbal and emotional abuse included putdowns, accusations of infidelity, 'bitchy' comments, and name-calling. Few of the respondents reported that they experienced social abuse (Bagshaw *et al.* 2000b, pp. 54-55).

Further analysis of men's experiences of abuse is required, especially in instances where men are also identified as the aggressor in the abusive relationship. James *et al.* (2002) report on the perceptions of 24 men attending domestic violence men's programmes conducted by Relationships Australia. The study involved men who were attending programmes to deal with violence and abuse they had inflicted on a partner. Within the study, men reported incidents where their partners had abused them in some way – usually emotionally – taken advantage of them or saw

themselves suffering more than their partner. The authors' commented that, despite this position adopted by the male partner, the men 'seemed emotionally resilient and were asymptomatic' (James *et al.* 2002, p. 11). Abusive acts recounted by the men included the following examples:

I felt very sort of unloved and you know, insignificant, and um I felt that, you know the biggest contribution I was making in the family was just bringing home a wage each fortnight.

And

Tim saw himself as a victim of his wife's attacks:

Tim: My wife doesn't take long to lash out and hit me. She lashes out very quickly and she's hit me a number of times and I've struck her back a couple of times.

Interviewer: When she hits you, do you feel frightened of her?

Tim: No.

Interviewer: When you hit her, is she frightened of you?

*Tim: Yeah, probably. She says, 'you're bigger than me and when you hit back it hurts a lot more than when I hit you'. (James *et al.* 2002, p. 11)*

These accounts raise issues about the need to understand the exact context of abuse and the dynamics of power and control existing in such relationships. It also emphasises that it is not useful to make direct comparisons between men and women's violence because the causes and consequences of violence are so different.

Are women equally abusive?

In 1999, Statistics Canada used a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) to ascertain levels of intimate partner violence in a general social survey (GSS) on victimisation. They reported that 8 per cent of 14,269 women and 7 per cent of 11,607 men had been subjected to at least one incident of intimate partner

violence (DeKeseredy & Schwartz 2003, p.1). The study found that men and women are exposed to the risk (of spousal violence) in almost the same proportions (Trainor 2002, p. 1). There has been much criticism and debate concerning the research methodology and motivations of this particular study. York University sociologist, Desmond Ellis, recently asserted in his critique of the 1999 GSS that, 'ignoring context, meaning and motive is misinforming... and not separating different types of violence is misleading' (De Keseredy & Swartz 2003, p. 7).

A Melbourne study (Heady *et al.* 1999, p. 58), which reported that men and women assault each other at equal rates, also used the CTS, in which men and women were asked whether, in the last year, they or their partner had done any of a range of violent acts. However, even the authors (Heady *et al.* 1999, p. 57, p. 61) acknowledged the limitations of their sampling method as their chosen method of a survey may under-report extreme violence because victims of such violence might be in refuges and so had not been surveyed. CTS studies also exclude looking at violent incidents after separation and divorce, which have been found to be critical periods with regard to safety for women (Flood 1999, p. 4).

Criticisms of such studies and other bodies of work assert that research tools such as the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) are inappropriate and inadequate in measuring the nature of violence and abuse in a domestic violence context. Recording violence should not be seen as merely recording different acts of violence but further efforts should be made to understand and record more about the context in which such violence occurs. More specifically, 'contextualising' the violence in terms of its impact on the intended victim is a critical component of such an assessment. Bagshaw and Chung (2000, p.6), amongst others, argue in their critique of the use of CTS that:

- The complex nature of the experience of domestic violence is reduced to single measurable acts;
- No distinction is made between attack and defence;
- Results that only include measurements tell us nothing about the situation in which the violence occurs;
- They give no consideration to the meaning or intent of the acts;
- They do not discriminate between the intent and the effect of the violent acts;

- They assume, incorrectly, that partners are equal in negotiations;
- The types of violence are ranked and poorly differentiated;
- They do not include many violent acts, such as burning, suffocating, squeezing, spanking, scratching, sexual assault and many forms of psychological, social and economic abuse;
- Violence is only counted over a one-year period and therefore the history of violence in the relationship is not considered; and,
- Violence is only seen as the result of differences or conflicts, and these surveys do not take into account attempts by one partner to control the other for no identifiable reason.

What are the differences?

The use of the CTS to measure male victims' experiences has been criticised on the grounds that, whilst studies may indicate similarities in the number of assaultive acts by men and women, it fails to recognise that there are substantial differences in injury levels (Dasgupta 2001, p. 3). Women receive significantly more serious injuries than do men. In her review of Jocelyn Scutt's study of 125 couples, James (1999, p. 156) concluded that:

What is apparent from Scutt's description is that while women may be capable of serious violence, men's violence is more humiliating, controlling and coercive. A woman's violence emanates from, and may be a refusal to, accept her less powerful position. A man's violence on the other hand, emanates from, and may be a way of asserting, his position of dominance.

Studies utilising CTS as a research tool also obscure issues such as women's violence as a form of self defence, and as such, linked to her own ongoing victimisation at the hands of her male partner. Women's motivations for violence appear to be multi-causal, including retaliation or an expression of loss of control or powerlessness. This is not to excuse women's violence, but to recognise the context in which it arises. In writing about the Duluth Abuse Intervention Project, Pence and McDonnell make this point in the following terms:

...we do not assume that all violence is the same. The person who is physically and sexually abused over a period of time and uses illegal violence as a way of stopping the violence is not doing the same thing as the person who continually uses violence to dominate and control a partner (Pence & McDonnell 1999, p. 44).

In this statement, they are arguing for an analysis of violence in context: violence stripped of its context can incorrectly identify a woman as the initiator of violence. Johnson (1995) addresses this issue by distinguishing between two forms of violence located within very different contexts – incidents that are part of an overall pattern of power and control which he terms ‘patriarchal terrorism’, and incidents that are occasional forms of couple violence. He supports his stance with evidence from a large sample survey research and from data gathered from women’s shelters and other public agencies, which suggest that a large number of families suffer from occasional outbursts of violence from either husbands or wives or both, while a significant number of other families are terrorised by systematic male violence enacted in the service of patriarchal control (Johnson 1995, p. 283). Johnson suggests that research confirms this dichotomy, citing differences in frequency, escalation, initiation and reciprocity of violence, between the two phenomena.

There are obvious differences between behaviour that uses a broad range of tactics intended to dominate and create fear and that which involves a reaction to a specific event or incident. Clear power differences exist in these circumstances and the resulting dynamics shed light on the nature of the abuse occurring. As Dasgupta (2001, p.3) states, ‘the question is not whether women have the potential to be abusive... but whether their violence towards heterosexual partners is comparable to men’s in terms of context, motivation, results and consequences.’ It is apparent from research that, although both genders use violence to achieve control, women more often try to secure short-term command over immediate situations, whereas men tend to establish widespread authority over a much longer period (Dasgupta 2001, p. 7).

Studies among female perpetrators have shown support for the argument that women’s physical violence towards male partners is based on self defence or retaliation (DeKeseredy et al. 1997; Hamberger et al. 1994). Research on 108

women who used physical violence towards a male partner found that almost all of these women had experienced physical abuse from their male partners (Swan & Snow 2002, p. 301). Another study of Emergency Department admissions had found that men who presented with injuries inflicted by their female partners also had a higher rate of domestic violence perpetration and arrests than men injured by other assailants (Muelleman & Burgess 1998, p. 866). This also lends some support for the argument that actions of the female partner were likely to have been retaliatory or in self defence.

Issues for consideration

Data collection

Improvements are required regarding the collection of data about men's and women's experiences of domestic violence. Often police data and crime survey statistics are unable to distinguish the exact nature of the relationship between the 'victim' and 'assailant'. There is also a marked variation in prevalence rates depending on how domestic violence is defined. What other forms of violence beyond just physical abuse should be included in definitions to describe men's and women's experiences? Gathering data that adequately represents the context and dynamics from which violence is initiated will provide transparency in discussions concerning women who use violence against a partner.

Research methods

Research methods that employ tools recognising the context in which violence occurs are necessary if there is to be a more constructive debate and comparison between men and women's violence. Atmore (2001, p. 49) suggests that Hegarty's (1998) multi-dimensional partner abuse measure, the Composite Abuse Scale, could be a useful starting point. The scale so far has only been applied to women's experiences of violence. Further qualitative studies that build upon the work undertaken by Bagshaw *et al.* (2000a) would also be useful in providing a richer picture of men's understandings and experiences of violence against them.

Theoretical basis for analysing partner violence

Criticism has been levelled at feminist and other critiques of violence as being unable to adequately explain men's victimisation, at the hands of a female partner. Sarantakos (2002, p. 14) has gone further and questions whether feminist impressions of gender relations and patriarchy are realistic. Retaining a feminist analysis of violence against women is entirely appropriate, as violence occurs in the context of perceived entitlement and institutionalised power that is the domain of men. Dobash *et al.* (1992) argue that those who claim wives and husbands are equally violent have offered no conceptual framework for understanding why women and men should think and act alike. They state:

We cannot hope to understand violence in marital, cohabitating and dating relationships without explicit attention to the qualities that make them different from other relationships (Dobash *et al.* 1992, p. 84).

They suggest that '*family violence research might usefully begin by examining the consonant and discordant desires, expectations, grievances, perceived entitlements, and preoccupations of husbands and wives, and by investigating theoretically derived hypotheses about circumstantial, ecological, contextual, and demographic correlates of such conflict*' (1992, p. 84). Further conceptual frameworks are required that broaden knowledge about men and women's violence. Otherwise, how is it possible to evaluate men and women's violence when we are comparing very different dynamics and tactics to describe their respective experiences?

Implications for service providers

Support agencies rarely publicise possible services for men as victims of domestic violence, probably as a consequence of the issues previously discussed within this paper. It raises issues about how men access support services in general, particularly their awareness of what is available to address their immediate needs. Authors such as Connell (1987) remind us that men are not a homogenous group and that understanding notions of masculinity will inform the field about men's help-seeking behaviours.

Men have pressure placed on them by societal values and norms to maintain a high level of invulnerability. Historically, men have been indoctrinated that being a man means being strong, that they do not discuss feelings, or seek help for individual problems, especially those with an intimate partner. Accordingly, men do not access support services and delay in doing so, unless there is absolute necessity.

There are many questions about access and service provision requiring discussion. For example:

- Is there a need for the provision of information that directly targets men as victims?
- Are men's help lines that service both men as victims and men as perpetrators appropriate?
- What resources (e.g. counselling guidelines) are necessary to ensure that men receive responses that meet their immediate needs?
- Are these services or resources able to meet the needs of gay men or would these be better provided by specific services or programmes that target gay men who are victims of partner violence?

One service that has developed a service delivery response to address men's needs has been the ACT Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS). They have found that prior to the commencement of MensLine in December 1998, contact from men measured between 2 and 5 per cent of all contacts. Contact from men has increased to 10 to 15 per cent as a result of MensLine. However, men who identify as having been subjected to violence or abuse in their relationships still remain at between 2 and 5 per cent of all calls. This particular percentage has remained consistent since the inception of DVCS in 1988 and has not changed in any significant way since the commencement of MensLine.

The DVCS has thought carefully about how to attract and advertise services exclusively for men experiencing or using violence. Consequently, they used the language 'men who are troubled by the use of violence and/or abuse in their relationships and its effects on themselves and those that they love'. Clearly, the

language avoids imposing blame and encourages men either as victims or abusers to contact the service.

A further issue requiring consideration is that concerning the options available to women who are abusive. Is it appropriate to send women to perpetrator programmes when such programmes are usually based around men's privilege, deconstructing notions of masculinity and its relationship to causes of violence? Research suggests that there are lower rates of service utilisation recorded for women batterers, particularly those from minority backgrounds (Abel 2001, p. 414). Further work is required to ascertain the pathways to services that this group of women may access.

Conclusion

Clearly, men's experiences as victims of domestic violence, either in heterosexual or gay relationships, are quite different from the experiences of women. Analysis needs to focus on the experiences of men in their own right and to not fall into the trap of asserting that men are just as likely to experience violence and abuse as women. It is recognised that men's experiences of abuse are insufficiently acknowledged and the challenge for those making criticisms is to conduct research to improve men's access to supports. It is evident from the current discourse on this issue that future research could look to further understand the contextual, power and impact differences between men's experiences and women's experiences of partner violence in heterosexual and same-sex relationships. Research methodology that results in material being used inappropriately to substantiate a particular viewpoint about violence can only create division and does nothing to inform the field about the complexities involved.

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