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What Comes Before Why: Specifying the Phenomenon of Intimate Partner Violence

In our article, “The Continuation of Intimate Partner Violence from Adolescence to Young Adulthood” (Cui, Ueno, Gordon, & Fincham, 2013), we found that being victimized by relationship partners in adolescence was significantly associated with both perpetration and victimization in romantic relationships in young adulthood. Though not our primary focus, we included gender as a covariate and tested its main effect on young adult intimate partner violence (IPV). The results showed that women reported higher levels of perpetration and lower levels of victimization than men did.

We appreciate Kristin Anderson’s (2013) commentary on this finding and agree with many of her observations. In particular, finding a resolution to the seemingly endless polemic about gender issues in IPV would be most welcome. As Carney, Buttell, and Dutton (2007) pointed out, this is “a debate that has been troubling for feminists since the first U.S. National Family Violence Survey of 1975 found

women to be as violent as men” (p.108). Since that first survey, more studies have suggested that the rate of female perpetration is equivalent to or exceeds that of male perpetration (Archer, 2000; Dutton, 2006; Gelles, 1972; Kimmel, 2002; Stets & Straus, 1992; Williams & Frieze, 2005), including some that used the same data set as we did (e.g., Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). But the findings on female perpetration have often been explained as women engaging in self-defense or as due to gender-biased reporting (see Carney et al., 2007).

Unfortunately, history shows that better research is unlikely to resolve matters in this highly politicized arena. As Ehrensaft (2008) pointed out in regard to IPV, long-standing beliefs and older theories persist in the face of new contradictory data and their demonstrated inability to improve interventions. This does not in any way imply that we should not strive to improve research on IPV, and we see Anderson’s commentary as a laudable attempt to do so. We are honored that our article serves as a platform for this attempt even though much of the commentary is tangential to our original study.

SPECULATION CAN BE USEFUL

Anderson takes us to task for our speculation on the gender difference we found. Specifically, we stated that “one possible reason is that women

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feel more empowered in relationships, and are therefore more likely to initiate verbal and physical aggression or use violence as a means of conflict resolution (Archer, 2006).” This speculation is a tenuous basis on which to build a critique. Yes, the sentence can indeed be deconstructed in many different ways, as Anderson outlines. Addressing just one of the possibilities raised by Anderson concerning “who starts the violence and that person’s motives for doing so” (p. 314), O’Leary and Slep (2006) showed that, in the immediate context of mild forms of physical aggression, men were more likely than women to report partner physical aggression as the precipitant for their own aggression, whereas women’s aggression was more often precipitated by the partners’ verbal aggression or something else than by the partners’ physical aggression. These authors concluded that “women may often be the first to escalate a conflict and use physical aggression” and that “this escalation may disinhibit men’s physical aggression” (p. 346). However, we suspect that Anderson would be equally critical of O’Leary and Slep’s gender findings, and this precludes an empirical answer (using existing data) to the various possibilities raised in her commentary.

Before turning to the position underlying Anderson’s whole commentary, the study of mechanism, we must register disagreement with the seeming rejection of speculative statements in discussing research findings. In contrast, we believe that such speculation plays an important role in advancing thinking and that suggesting new hypotheses is a valuable function of such speculation even if it does result in “head spinning.” Systematic testing of the hypotheses has the potential to advance understanding and soon puts an end to any head spinning.

ONLY RESEARCH ON MECHANISM?

At the heart of Anderson’s critique is an insistence that research examine “why gender matters for IPV perpetration and victimization” (p. 315). This emphasis on mechanism, however, requires documentation of an association between gender and victimization and/or perpetration. Why otherwise try to explain (a nonexistent) association? Because, as we noted, “few studies have examined IPV as it emerges in adolescence and is potentially maintained into young adulthood,” it is entirely appropriate, given the population studied, to

provide descriptive data, including the association between IPV and gender. We need basic descriptive data (observations) to ask questions, which then lead to hypotheses, and so on.

Here it behooves us to remember Einstein’s (1934) observation that “the world of phenomena uniquely determines the theoretical system” (p. 4). What are the phenomena (carefully described and systematically replicated) that we study in the literature on IPV? Our impression is that we have not done as well as we should have in describing the phenomena we study and that greater attention to this issue will do much to enhance systematic, cumulative knowledge and will further the development of integrative theory and research on IPV. It is to this issue that we now turn.

WHAT IS THE PHENOMENON? SEPARATING THE APPLES FROM THE ORANGES

As noted, the issue of whether IPV is primarily perpetrated by men remains controversial. Data from police reports, criminal victimization surveys, and shelter samples show that men perpetrate IPV at rates higher than women do (70%–95%; Straus & Ramirez, 2007). This stands in stark contrast to data from community sample surveys, which are more comparable to the data reported in our original article. The reasons for this discrepancy have been discussed by Straus (1979).

The days of considering IPV as a unitary phenomenon need to be brought to an end, and, happily, there are signs that this is happening. Johnson (2005) has done the field a great service in distinguishing different types of IPV, and we heartily concur with Anderson that in our study, “it’s common couple violence already” (p. 316). For us, it was never anything else! We never intended our study to reflect IPV in all its forms but rather to speak to one type of IPV, common couple violence.

Much of the confusion in the literature may arise from using the same term, *IPV*, to refer to what are essentially different phenomena. At a minimum, it is time for scholars to come to a consensus on using different terms for the phenomena studied in shelter samples and in national surveys. It would likely have proven profitable for the field to adopt Johnson’s (2005) typology, validate it further, and then go about developing a cumulative body of knowledge for each of the phenomena (types) identified.

The failure of the field to coalesce around this typology may reflect the fact that it is one of many that have been proposed with each having its own set of supporters.

Although potentially an advance, the above-described process is not the ideal way to establish phenomena. Ideally, we would follow the example of ethologists and develop an ethogram (a complete description of the observed behavior of interest) before trying to explain the behavior. Of course, observing the behavior as it occurs in the natural environment, as done in ethology, is not practically feasible in the present case, but this should not preclude one from providing descriptive information about the behavior using whatever means are available.

In light of the above comments, it is encouraging that attempts to remediate a unitary view of the diverse phenomena captured by the term *IPV*

range from the application of an event perspective that investigates connections between event elements and their surrounding contexts to *IPV* (Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005) to a comprehensive contextual model comprising multiple contextual units that can, in turn, be used to identify and examine variables that may have a proximal relationship with *IPV*. (Fincham & Beach, 2010, p. 633)

WHAT'S GOOD FOR THE GOOSE IS GOOD FOR THE GANDER: WHERE'S THE THEORY?

Throughout her commentary, Anderson repeatedly suggests that gender is a serious theoretical problem. It is ironic, however, that Anderson offers no theories beyond the one we discussed in our original article. Although advocating theoretical exploration, what Anderson proposes are mostly methodological refinements, including obtaining more accurate reporting of *IPV* (cf. the problem of over- and underreporting of *IPV*), how longitudinal studies likely result in selection effects regarding types of *IPV* (i.e., represent "common couple" violence), and that such gendered findings may be due to the fact that women do less physical harm than men. We will address each of these points.

Accuracy

Regarding accurate reporting of *IPV*, Anderson suggests that women may overreport their own

perpetration, whereas men may underreport it, or that both women and men underreport *IPV* but men underreport more, which may account for the result we found that women perpetrate more *IPV* than men. With self-reported *IPV* perpetration and victimization by both men and women, it is hard to conclude whether respondents overreport or underreport and whether there are gender differences in such potential reporting bias. Most of these are hypotheses, and findings are inconsistent regarding overreporting or underreporting (Anderson, 1997; Browning & Dutton, 1986; Schafer, Caetano, & Clark, 2002; Szinovacz & Egley, 1995). One approach to rectifying this issue is to find a sample that can provide not only women's and men's (i.e., targets') report of their own *IPV* but also their partners' report and trained observers' ratings of their (i.e., targets') *IPV*. Using the item, "During the past month, when you and your partner have spent time together, how often do you hit, push, grab, and shove your partner?", Cui, Lorenz, Conger, Melby, and Bryant (2005) examined reports from self, partner, and observer. They found that self-reported perpetration was significantly lower than partner and outside observer report, suggesting underreporting of perpetration by self. We discussed this possibility of underreporting by self in our original study (i.e., Cui et al. 2013). However, what is relevant here is that such underreporting was consistent across gender so the gendered pattern (i.e., women reported higher *IPV* perpetration than men) remained. Such empirical findings suggest that women's overreporting and men's underreporting, or men's underreporting more, as Anderson proposes, are not supported by available data.

Common Couple Violence

Anderson also suggests that our findings that women showed higher levels of *IPV* perpetration than men was because we used a longitudinal, nationally representative sample that "overrepresent[ed] common couple violence and underrepresent[ed] intimate terrorism" (p. 316). We agree and, as noted, we never pretended that we were investigating intimate terrorism. After all, the advantage of using a large nationally representative sample is to be able to generalize to the general population, not to intimate terrorists. Such findings are consistent with many other studies that have used representative sample

surveys both in the United States and in other Western countries (e.g., Carney et al., 2007; Ehrensaft, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2004; LaRoche, 2005; Straus, 2004). Furthermore, studies of police records and criminal samples also suggest an increasing incidence of female-perpetrated IPV (e.g., Buzawa, Austin, Bannon, & Jackson, 1992; Henning & Feder, 2004; Schwartz, Stefensmeier, & Feldmeyer, 2009). It is likely that the parameters (e.g., origins, correlates) relating to intimate partner terrorism are quite different from those concerning common couple violence, and clarity regarding the type of IPV studied is essential in future research.

It's Not Just Shoves

Anderson suggests that another potential reason for women's higher level of IPV perpetration might be that women's violence is less effective and so women may need to perpetrate more than men to get the same results. The suggestion that "women get less bang for their shove" (p. 317) seems to refer to physical consequences. However, the IPV measure we used included not only physical violence but also verbal violence. Regarding physical violence specifically, indeed, most studies suggest greater severity by male perpetrators. But several studies also suggest that female perpetration causes a similar degree of injury as male-perpetrated IPV (Archer, 2000; Carney et al., 2007; Felson & Cares, 2005; LaRoche, 2005; Stets & Straus, 1992; Straus, 2004, 2009). Regarding such physical perpetration, Anderson's proposal that "women get less bang for their shove" is not supported by our data. Of the four perpetration items we used, one item was "How often did your partner have an injury, such as a sprain, bruise, or cut because of a fight with you?" We found similar mean levels for male participants and female participants in both Wave III and Wave IV. Yes, men on average may have more powerful shoves, but the availability of objects as weapons may be an equalizer.

It may be that Anderson intends "less bang for their shove" to mean that women are less likely to get partner compliance with their wishes as a result of engaging in common couple violence. This is indeed possible; however, the question extends our current focus on the degree and frequency of IPV to the intention and effectiveness of violence. It is an important

yet different empirical question that is best addressed by future studies.

CONCLUSION

We believe that Anderson's commentary serves a useful function in stimulating discussion of future research, one that extends well beyond the consideration of gender. Without a more broadly based discussion that includes careful delineation of the related phenomena hitherto captured under the single label of "IPV," we believe that confusion, the enemy of science, will continue to stymie this area of research. Better research may not resolve polemics in this highly politicized area, but it is likely to provide a useful tool for those brave enough to become activists and take on entrenched interests in this political arena. As Straus (2005) stated, neither male perpetration nor female perpetration is "the" social problem. Instead, we need to address both phenomena and find ways to reduce the risk of IPV.

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