

The Context of Intimate Partner Violence: Three Common Myths  
An Annotated Bibliography by John Hamel, LCSW  
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**MYTH #1: Mutual abuse is a rare phenomenon. Even if men and women assault each other at comparable rates, men are typically the initiators and the dominant partners.**

**THE FACTS: Most IPV is mutual. Women initiate somewhat more often than men.**

**Straus (1993).** A second National Family Violence Survey was conducted in 1985, with a sample exceeding 6,000 respondents. To eliminate the problem of male underreporting, Straus and his colleagues examined the data provided by the wives and found that in 48.6% of assaults, both partners were violent. The husband was the sole perpetrator in 25.9% of the cases, and the wife 25.5% of the time. In addition, the wives reported that they initiated the violence 53.1% of the time, and their husbands 42.3% of the time. The wives could not remember who started the violence in the remaining 3.1% of cases.

**Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Neidig and Thorn (1995).** A survey of 200 military couples in which the police responded to a domestic violence call reported an 83% rate of mutual assaults.

**Moffitt & Caspi (1999); Ehrensaft et al. (2004).** In a longitudinal study of 1,037 New Zealanders most cases of partner violence among young adults were deemed to have been mutual. Aggressive personality and conduct disorder in childhood predicted female-to-male IPV in adulthood, above and beyond any male-to-female IPV.

**Morse (1995).** In the National Youth Survey, which surveyed 1,725 respondents in the Eastern United States, 61.3% of the men and 54.2% of the women reported that the female partner had initiated the violence in their last serious argument.

**DeMaris (1992).** A dating population study of 865 students at four universities in the South determined that it was the female partner more often than not who initiated the physical violence.

**Dutton, Kwong, Bartholomew & Kim (1999).** Of the women reporting violence in a representative sample of 707 adult respondents in Alberta, Canada, 67% identified themselves as the initiator.

**Shupe, Stacey & Hazlewood (1987).** High rates of female-initiated violence were found in this sample of couples in which the man had been court-mandated to batterer intervention. In this Texas study, it was found that the woman victim initiated the assaults one-third of the time.

**Gondolf (1996).** In this multi-site study of men's BIP's the female victims reported to have initiated the violence in 40% of the cases during a treatment follow-up period.

**White, Merrill and Koss (2001).** The greatest risk factor for physical violence perpetration in this study of 2,784 Navy recruits was physical or psychological victimization by one's partner.

**Stets (1991).** This survey of dating students found a high correlation for both genders between psychological abuse victimization and perpetration.

**Margolin, John and Gleberman (1988).** Among the first studies to investigate the relationship dynamics among couples with an abusive husband, using direct observation of subjects in the laboratory. The results were a far cry from Walker's (1983) three-phase cycle (tension build-up, battering event, contrition). For instance, it was found that negative communication by moderately abusive husbands was reciprocated with negative communication by the wives.

**Cordova, Jacobsen, Gottman, Rushe and Cox (1993).** In this laboratory study, which focused on severe assaults by men, the authors concluded: "Women were every bit as inclined toward negative reciprocity as the men...There is virtually no evidence from these interaction sequences that battered women placate their husbands or attempt in any way to neutralize their aversive behavior. The behavior of DV wives in this sample does not suggest passivity, docility, or surrender. Rather, the women are continuing the conflict engagement, even though they have histories of being subjected to physical abuse" (p. 563).

**Burman, John & Margolin (1992).** The wives of abusive husbands in this laboratory study responded to both negative-offensive statements (e.g., criticism, insult) *and* negative-defensive statements (disagreement, "yes/but") with negative-offensive statements of their own. The husbands, however, typically responded to negative-offensive statements with negative-defensive ones.

**Babcock, Waltz, Jacobsen and Gottman (1993).** This laboratory study found that violent husbands and their wives were equally likely to make demands of the other, or to withdraw in response to their partner's demands, thus ensuring continuation of the conflict, as well as further resentments and power struggles.

**Jacobsen, Gottman, Waltz, Rushe, Babcock & Holtzworth-Munroe (1994).** Still another laboratory study involving couples with an abusive husband. The husbands were observed to be more domineering and defensive, but the wives were rated as more angry, belligerent and contemptuous. In spite of the self-selective nature of the sample (all the men had perpetrated either several acts of serious violence, or at least one act of very serious violence, in the past year) the authors later noted that half the wives would have qualified for batterer treatment.

**MYTH #2: Men use violence intentionally to control their partners, whereas women use violence in self-defense, or as a way to express frustration or to communicate.**

**THE FACTS: Self-defense is an equally unlikely motive for both genders. Male and female perpetrators are motivated to abuse their partners for various reasons, including a desire to retaliate or to communicate feelings, and there is no convincing evidence that men are significantly more motivated to control.**

**Saunders (1986).** Found high rates of self-defense in samples of battered women. In one study, 39% of respondents said they had used severe violence exclusively in self-defense, and another 42% reported that self-defense was the motive at least half the time. Thus, even among such a highly victimized population self-defense is used in less than half the cases.

**Sommer (1994).** This Winnipeg general population survey of 1,000 respondents reported that only 10% of partner violent women and 15% of partner violent men had used physical aggression in self-defense.

**Cascardi and Vivian (1995).** Of the 62 partner-violent spouses in marital counseling studied by the authors, only 5% of the wives and 10% of the husbands identified self-defense as a motive for their use of mild physical aggression. More wives endorsed self defense as a motive for severe physical aggression (20%), a significantly higher percentage than what severely aggressive husbands reported (0%), yet still quite low overall. In addition, the women reported anger more often than men as a motive for violence, but the men reported higher rates for the combined motives of anger and coercion (57% vs. 40% for severe aggression).

**Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd & Sebastian (1991).** In this survey of dating couples 17% of the men and 18% of the women said they had hit in self-defense. In addition, the women were more likely than the men to report having assaulted a partner “in retaliation for emotional hurt” (55.9% vs. 25.0%), “to show anger” (57.6% vs. 37.5%), and “to get control over the other person” (22.0% vs. 8.3%).

**Carrado, George, Loxam, Jones & Templar (1996).** Among the 1,978 respondents of this British national survey who reported to have engaged in partner violence, 17% of women and 21% of men claimed to have done so because they “thought he/she was about to use a physical action against me.” Approximately 21% of women and 27% of men said they were “getting back at him/her for some physical action she/he had used against me.” This might be interpreted as self-defense but probably also indicates retaliation, in which the abused party engages in violent behavior to punish the partner or to vent anger, rather than strictly to protect himself or herself from immediate harm. The two most common motives were attempts to communicate (“I thought it was the only way to get through to him/her”), reported by 53% of the women and 64% of the men; and retaliation (“Was getting back at him/her for something nasty he/she said or threatened to do to me”), reported by nearly identical percentages of women and men (52% vs. 53%).

**Felson and Messner (1998).** This analysis of 2,000 intimate partner homicides found that self-defense, defined as protecting oneself from bodily harm, accounted for 9.6% of female-perpetrated killings, and only .5% of male. A definition that included retaliation to previous physical attacks yielded rates of 46.2% and 11.1%.

**Mann (1988).** Sixty-percent of the women killers surveyed had claimed self-defense in this study of spousal murders in several large urban areas. However, 58% of the murders were determined to have been premeditated. Furthermore, 30% of the women killed their partners when those partners were incapacitated - either drunk, bound or asleep; yet, the majority of these women (60%) also claimed self-defense.

**Makepeace (1986).** In a large survey of dating university students conducted in several states (N = 2, 338), the women reported a far greater use of self-defense than the men (35.6% vs. 18.1%), unusual for a non-shelter sample. Only 6.8% reported intimidation as a motive, compared to 21.3% of the men. However, more women than men said their intent was “to harm”

(8.3% vs. 2.4%), and comparable percentages of women (24.2%) and men (28.3) said their violence was due to “uncontrollable anger.”

**Graham-Kevan & Archer (2005).** This survey of 358 female students and staff at an English university who had used partner violence in the previous 12 months found no correlation between fear and a woman’s use of severe violence. Significant effects, however, were found for reciprocal violence, as a means of retribution, and for a desire to control one’s partner.

**Follingstad, Bradley, Helff & Laughlin (2002).** This survey of 412 dating university students found that for both genders intimate partner anger is related to anxious attachment, and that aggressive males and females alike use coercive tactics as a means of preventing abandonment.

**Stuart et al. (2006).** The authors asked 87 female offenders to select among 29 items all of their reasons for assaulting their partners. Self-defense was endorsed by 39% of the respondents, and 25.8% said they wanted to “get away” from their partner. Items indicating an expressive motive were more frequently endorsed: for example, 39% of the respondents said they wanted “to show anger.” Three similar items were endorsed at comparable rates. None of the individual items that could be classified as “coercive” were endorsed by more than 25% of the respondents; however, there were far more such items listed overall (e.g., “to get control over partner,” 22%; “to get partner to do something or stop doing something,” 22%). In addition, 25% of the violent women endorsed the item, “to get your partner’s attention,” and 18% endorsed “because you were afraid your partner was going to leave you,” items that could be interpreted as examples of either expressive *or* coercive motivation.

**Fiebert & Gonzalez (1997).** Attempts to communicate motivated a high percentage of the partner abusive women in this Southern California survey – 44% wanted to “get partner’s attention,” while 43% said their partner was “not listening to me.” Reflecting societal tolerance for women’s IPV, 38% said that they “did not believe my actions would hurt my partner.”

**Hamberger, Lohr & Bonge (1994); Hamberger, Lohr, Bonge & Tolin (1997).** Responses by male and female offenders to the question, “What is the function, purpose or payoff of your violence” were sorted by independent raters and analyzed by the research team. Both males and females reported a variety of motives, including anger expression, control and retaliation; however, males expressed a greater variety of controlling motives and did not endorse self-defense or escape.

**Swan and Snow (2002).** In this study of 108 mostly African-American partner violent women drawn from health clinics, the subjects admitted to having been more physically and emotionally assaultive than their partners, but to have suffered higher levels of sexual coercion and isolation-type control tactics. The authors admit that the instrument used to gauge coercive control, the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory, was designed to measure men’s behaviors (e.g., “get upset if housework was not done when you wanted,” and “demand partner stay home and take care of the children”), and recommend that “a new scale particular to women’s violence is needed” (p. 312).

**Kernsmith (2005).** Compared male and female participants in batterer treatment. No significant differences were found between the genders in the frequency that each reported self defense as a motive for their violence. The women were more likely than the men to aggress for reasons of 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. Retaliation was a more common motive for both men and women than a desire to exert power and control.

**MYTH #3: Only men are controlling and engage in the combination of repeat emotional and physical abuse known as “battering” or “intimate terrorism.”**

**THE FACTS: Although women are far more often the victims of sexual coercion, they are just as likely as men to be the perpetrators of most psychological abuse and controlling behaviors, and this includes stalking when broadly defined.**

**Straus et al. (1980); Straus & Gelles (1990).** Both National Family Violence Surveys, with a combined sample of more than 8,000 respondents, reported comparable gender rates for not only physical assaults, but *verbal* abuse as well.

**Rouse, Breen and Howell (1988).** This survey of 130 dating and 130 married students found that women are more likely than men to engage in isolation behaviors, such as “monitors time,” “discourages same-sex friends” and “discourages opposite sex friends.”

**Stets (1991).** The male and female respondents in this study of dating students reported equivalent rates of controlling behaviors (e.g., “I keep my partner in line,” “I am successful in imposing my will onto my partner”), as well as psychological abuse (e.g., “Said mean things,” “Degraded him/her”).

**Kasian & Painter (1992).** The authors surveyed a large sample (1,625) university students. Male respondents reported higher rates of received abuse, as measured by a modified version of the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory, for control, jealousy/isolation, verbal abuse and withdrawal of affection. There were no gender differences in rates of received emotional abuse (“diminishment of self-esteem”).

**Feder and Henning (2005).** In this study of 317 couples dually arrested for IPV, most of them African-American, criminal justice data revealed no differences between the partners in injuries inflicted or weapons use. Interview data revealed no differences in physical assault; women were more likely to use a weapon, but to suffer slightly higher rates of injuries (19.6% vs. 15.0%). There were no gender differences in overall psychological abuse or coercive control tactics.

**Stacey, Hazelwood and Shupe (1994).** Higher rates of victimization than perpetration were reported by the male subjects in this Texas study of men in batterer treatment on four of the thirteen items from the CSR Abuse Index: “deny rights to privacy,” “deny access to family,” “withdraw emotions to punish,” and “withhold sex to punish.” Although the men reported lower rates of victimization than females on the other items, the differences were usually not large (e.g., “deny freedom of activities” was cited by 71% of men and 72% of women; “deny access to friends” was cited by 57% of men and 63% of women, and “censor phone calls” was reported by

53% of men and 60% of women.) One would have expected much larger differences from this population, considering that the men had been arrested and deemed “batterers,” while their female partners were deemed the “victims.”

**Tjaden & Thoennes (2000).** The National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS), drawing on a sample of 16,000 men and women, reported that 0.2% of men are stalked each year by a current or former intimate, and 0.5% of women, a ratio of 2.5 women for each man victimized. In addition, .038% of the men reported to having been raped the previous year. Five times as many women (0.2%) said that this had happened to them.

**Spitzberg and Rhea (1999).** The authors examined a variety of stalking subtypes, collectively known as obsessive relational intrusion (ORI). Results from their sample of college students in Texas revealed a 54% rate of male-perpetrated ORI's, versus 46% for females.

**Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Palarea, Cohen & Rohling (2000).** In this college survey, respondents were asked to report on their own ORI behavior, as well as incidents of victimization. There were no overall gender differences in stalking rates. However, men made more unwanted visits to homes and apartments, whereas women left the greater share of unwanted phone messages. Women were also four times as likely to report having been physically threatened.

**Meloy & Boyd (2003).** The authors reported on 82 female cases from mental health clinics and some who came to the attention of law enforcement. The women were similar to male stalkers in having a history of failed intimate relationships and having cluster “B” DSM IV personality disorders (not antisocial). They were also similar in that 50% - 75% threatened and 50% - 55% assaulted their victim. But they were different in that they more often carried out threats and caused property damage.

**Busby & Compton (1997).** A large survey of 3,034 engaged couples reported that 6.1% men and 13.0% women had been sexually pressured by their partner.

**O’Sullivan et al. (1998).** In this survey of 433 dating university students, 18.5% of the men and 42.5% of women reported to having been sexually coerced by their partner.

**Muehlenhard and Cook (1988).** This college study revealed that men more often than women engaged in unwanted sexual intercourse, at rates of 63% versus 46%. Being taken advantage of when intoxicated was reported by 30.8% of the men, and 21.0% of the women. Among the men, 13.4% had been verbally coerced, and 11.5% of the women said that this had happened to them. The rates were 5.7% for men subjected to nonviolent coercion (e.g., blocking the door, holding the person down), compared with 5.4% for the women. Coercion involving physical assaults was experienced by 1.4% of the men and 2.7% of the women.

**Waldner-Haugrud and Magruder (1995).** The authors asked a dating population about a range of coercive sexual behaviors. In the previous year, the men had an average of 2.26 incidents perpetrated upon them, and the women 2.86. Persistent touching was reported by 51% of males and 70% of females. Men were twice as likely to report blackmail (8.5% versus 4.2%);

women reported a higher incidence of manipulative guilt (30.1% versus 22.5%). The women were twice as likely as men to be restrained or detained, and more threatened with physical force (6.9% to 6.0%); but three times more men had weapons used against them (4.5% versus 1.4%).

**Coker, Davis, Arias, Desai, Sanderson, Brandt and Smith (2002).** A re-examination of data of 16,000 respondents from the National Violence Against Women Survey found lifetime male victimization rates of 10.5% for experienced verbal abuse and jealousy/possessiveness, and 6.8% for power/control, compared to rates of 5.2% and 6.9% for women.

**Riggs, O’Leary and Breslin (1990).** Found a strong correlation between having a dominant and aggressive personality and IPV for both men *and* women.

**Cano, Avery-Leaf, Cascardi and O’Leary (1998).** Found a significant correlation in high school dating study for boys and girls between the use of jealousy and dominance tactics and physical assaults.

**Hines & Saudino (2003).** Using the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale, this survey of 481 university students found comparable levels of physical aggression between the genders. Women were found to have engaged in higher levels of psychological aggression, and the two types of abuse tended to co-exist.

**Graham-Kevan & Archer (in press).** Drawing upon a community sample of university students and faculty in Lancashire, England, the authors found rates of 13% for female intimate terrorists and 9% for male intimate terrorists, based upon the same criteria as used by Michael Johnson (a combination of physical violence, control, and psychological abuse).

**Laroche (2005).** Analyzed a massive Canadian study involving 25,876 respondents. In addition to questions on physical assaults, the survey also asked respondents about victimization from the following psychologically abusive and controlling behaviors by their partner, similar to those in the Duluth Power and Control Wheel: “Limits your contact with family or friends,” “puts you down or calls you names to make you feel bad,” “is jealous and doesn’t want you to talk to other men/women,” “harms or threatens to harm someone close to you,” demands to know who you are with and where you are at all times,” “damages or destroys your possessions or property,” and “prevents you from knowing about or having access to the family income, even if you ask.” Approximately 3% of the surveyed women, and 2% of the men, were counted as victims of severe intimate terrorism (IT) - defined as having experienced severe and frequent physical violence and high levels of psychological abuse and control, and who would fit Ehrensaft et al.’s (2004) “clinical abuse cases” from injuries sustained, fear expressed, and use of police and other services. This means that men represent fully 40% of IT victims, an underestimation considering the study’s methodology (akin to the NVAWS in that its questionnaire framed IPV in terms of personal safety rather than conflict, thus suppressing male victimization rates) and “the inadequate assessment of controlling behaviors suffered by men” (p. 11).

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