

## RESPONSE TO PETER FAWSON'S "VIEWING PARTNER VIOLENCE AS A HUMAN PROBLEM AND NOT ONLY A GENDER PROBLEM"

(See Previous Response)

Dear Editor,

### RESEARCHING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: THE GREAT DEBATE ON METHODS, MEASURES, AND OUTCOME

Researchers from two camps disagree on the role of gender in intimate partner abuse (IPA) research. Family violence researchers want to "take gender out" of violence. They often mistakenly claim that feminist researchers do not want men to receive services, or do not believe that men are victims. On the contrary, feminist researchers do acknowledge that male victims should not be denied services. However, their primary argument is that researchers cannot take gender out of violence and without sacrificing research quality. Feminist researchers petition that violence is all about gender; to ignore gender is to ignore the most prominent characteristic of intimate partner violence. Researchers cannot take gender out of intimate partner abuse because IPA is a gendered problem. This is not to say that men cannot be victims or do not need access to services. Instead, it is simply stating that more women than men are victimized and need access to services, and proclaiming that this fact should not be ignored.

The primary difference between research conducted by family violence and feminist researchers is that family violence researchers claim men and women are violent at about equal rates ("gender symmetrical violence") (Straus, Gelles et al. 1986). For this reason, they claim gender does not matter in research and often conduct research that inadequately addresses gender. On the contrary, feminist researchers claim that women are disproportionately the victims of IPA, while men are disproportionately the perpetrators of IPA ("gender asymmetrical violence") (Melton and Belknap 2003; Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). For this reason, feminists claim that reliable research cannot disregard the importance of gender in violent intimate relationships.

The point of this article is not to argue the differences in findings of family violence and feminist researchers. Researchers have been arguing those same differences in findings for decades to no avail. Instead, the focus of this paper is to show how and why the two research camps arrive at different conclusions, and to demonstrate why it is imperative that gender remain a vital part of the research of violence in intimate relationships.

Women are disproportionately controlled, beaten, raped, and killed by men (Belknap and Melton 2005; Johnson 2008). From 1976 to 1995, 30% of female murder victims were killed by an intimate partner compared to only 5% of male murder victims (BJS 2007). Approximately 1.5 million women and

834,700 men are physically or sexually assaulted by an intimate partner annually in the United States. Moreover, women average more than twice as many victimizations per victim as men (Tjaden and Thoennes 1998). These findings demonstrate unmistakable gender differences in violence victimization and perpetration. They do not indicate an absence of male victims, but they do indicate prevalence of male perpetrators and female victims. I do not propose ignoring the male victims.

The term "gender symmetry" is debated by family violence and feminist researchers. To understand the "gender symmetry" debate, it is imperative to identify the difference between family violence and feminist definitions of "gender symmetry." Without understanding which of these definitions researchers use to define "gender symmetry," it is impossible to analyze the two sides.

Family violence methodologies define "gender symmetry" as an equal number of men and women that use violence in current relationships over a one-year period. Family violence researchers determine that violence is "symmetrical" by examining how many couples only report male violence, only report female violence, or report that both individuals used violence (Straus, Gelles et al. 2006). A major deficit of this research is that there is no analysis of the frequency of violent acts. If a man, or a woman, uses violence 1000 times or 1 time, it is not differentiated in the calculations.

Feminist researchers use a broader conceptualization of gender symmetry than do family violence theorists. Feminist methods find that men use violence more often than women, more men use violence than women, motivations for violence differ for men and women, and outcomes of violence are unequal for men and women (Kimmel 2002). The broader conceptualization of symmetry used by feminist researchers produces gender asymmetrical results

Family violence researchers ignore gender in conceptualizations when violence is used. According to family violence methods of defining battering, "Any couple where either the husband hit the wife, or the wife hit the husband - even if it was 'just' a slap or push - was counted as having been violent that year (Straus, Gelles et al. 2006)." This means that if someone uses violence in self defense she is seen as equally violent as someone who uses a planned campaign of terror to control a partner. Because family violence researchers classify any violence as "abusive" (Straus and Hotaling 1980), all violence appears equal. By only counting frequencies of violent acts over the period of a year, family violence methods fail to differentiate between self-defense motives or motives to gain power and control.

Feminist definitions of battering include: sexual violence, violence from previous relationships, stalking, and violence directed towards other family members or pets with the intention of harming the primary victim. Feminist researchers have identified that female aggression is found to be "resistance to domination" instead of one side of mutual combat (Lischick 1999). Women who use violence are more

likely to have been victimized, and to report that violence was in self defense (DeKeseredy, Saunders, et al. 1997); this type of “fighting back” is hardly “battering”. Because of ignorance to the role of gender in IPA conceptualizations, research methods chosen by family violence theorists are inadequate to assess IPA. A primary example of this is the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) used to measure violence in the majority of research conducted by family violence researchers. The CTS is a list of actions that one partner may use in conflict against another partner. Use of the CTS consistently results in gender symmetry (Fiebert 1997), defined as an equal number of men and women use violence over a year.

There are several weaknesses in measuring violence with the CTS. To be specific, the conflict tactics scale used by many family violence researchers is inadequate to study violence because the CTS overlooks differences in frequencies, socially learned violence, types of battery beyond arguments, injury, and reporting differences. The CTS overlooks significant differences in the number of times men and women perpetrate or inflict injuries over the course of a year (Melton and Belknap 2003). The CTS does not acknowledge gender effects beyond sex frequencies, and the CTS ignores structural gender inequalities (Salari and Baldwin 2002). There is no analysis of gender differences in violence training, socialized gender pairings, or gendered access to resources. The CTS carries the assumption that battery is result of an argument. When the CTS frame questions about violence, it frames them in the context of a couple arguing. The result of framing the question of violence in the context of a “spat ... (Straus et al. 2006:256), is that violence may be part of a general pattern of control, and may not be related to an argument, disagreement, or annoyance. The CTS does not acknowledge violence from previous relationships, sexual violence, or injury, each of which are significant risk for women (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). The CTS does not account for size differences or differences in violence training by gender, or for gendered reporting differences, although research suggests that men are more likely to report victimization and less likely to report perpetration than women (Kimmel 2002). It is interesting to note that many forms of violence neglected by family violence researchers are those most likely to indicate gender differences.

In great contrast to the CTS, feminist methodologies show that an inclusion of an analysis of gender provides a more complete analysis. Rather than relying on the CTS, feminist researchers use a variety of data sources, research methods and tools. Instead of simply counting use of violence in the year, feminist interviews and surveys address context, injuries, frequencies, sexual violence, violence in past relationships, and gendered reporting differences. By exploring a range of violent behaviors and contexts, feminist researchers present a more complete picture of violence in intimate relationships. Where asymmetry is found, the CTS is either not used, or is used in conjunction with other tools that measure the aspects of violence neglected by the CTS (Romans, Forte, et al. 2007).

In summary, by neglecting to research gender, family violence researchers produce biased results that downplay the role of gender in violence outcomes. They undercount female victims, and undercount acts of male perpetration. Without an inclusion of gender in conceptualization about violence, gender is neglected in methods and research. When this happens, researchers create an incomplete, biased picture of violence. Gender must be included in violence analyses to truly understand intimate partner abuse and to better serve victims. Negligence of the study of gender in IPA research is a great disservice to all victims.

Sincerely,

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