

# Gender Arguments and Paradigmatic Challenges within Intimate Partner Violence Research: A Call for a more Inclusive Paradigm of Understanding Regarding Physical Partner Violence Perpetration

Melissa Corbally<sup>1</sup>  · Judy Hughes<sup>2</sup> · David Delay<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract** This paper suggests that the epistemology surrounding intimate partner violence (IPV) is flawed due to two areas in particular: 1) an overreliance on quantitative methodologies that lack the detailed and contextual information required for complex understandings of IPV and 2) the minimization of alternative theoretical perspectives on the meaning of gender. Although an ecological perspective to understanding IPV has been advocated by the World Health Organization as a useful theoretical framework from which to understand IPV (Krug et al. 2002), few empirical studies have tested this complex perspective. We suggest that broader research approaches may prove useful in shedding light on non-conventional IPV experiences, potentially broadening our understanding of this complex phenomenon.

**Keywords** Intimate partner violence · Paradigm · Gender · Methodology · Epistemology

It is without question that research has become crucially important in the evolution of modern societies. Where IPV is concerned, there is no doubt that an abundance of research has been undertaken on a phenomenon which is of world significance with its high burden of associated poor health outcomes (Krug et al. 2002). Where IPV research is concerned, gender seems to matter a great deal and holds a strong paradigmatic position. This is true for other concepts, as well,

such as physicality (intimacy), violence, families and relationships. Thomas Kuhn (1970) speaks to these cherished paradigmatic positions in his influential book ‘The Structure of Scientific Revolutions’ stating that:

The activity in which most scientists inevitably spend almost all their time, is predicated on the assumption that the scientific community knows what the world is like. Much of the success of the enterprise derives from the community’s willingness to defend that assumption, if necessary at considerable cost. Normal science, for example, often suppresses fundamental novelties because they are necessarily subversive of its basic commitments. (p5)

A key problem in the IPV ‘gender-symmetry’ debate is the differing epistemological and ontological approaches to the meaning of gender, as well as IPV. Whilst both of these have traditionally been characterized in a binary fashion (largely influenced by the structure of traditional patriarchal societies of the time), contemporary societies and discourse have resulted in many diversifications in relation to the meaning and nature of both. Such diversification inevitably challenges social researchers charged with ‘measuring’ phenomena or describing, explaining and or predicting the world. Considering Kuhn’s assertion, we suggest in this paper that perhaps the scientific community of today might not necessarily ‘know what the world is like’ in relation to IPV in contemporary societies, given the evolution of meaning surrounding key concepts such as gender, relationships, families and violence. For example, meanings surrounding gender have evolved greatly (Butler 2010). Additionally, technological advances, such as social media, mobile phone technology and geo tracking capability, have introduced ‘digital stalking’ as a new means by which ‘violence’ can be perpetrated with a victim

✉ Melissa Corbally  
melissa.corbally@dcu.ie

<sup>1</sup> School of Nursing and Human Sciences, Dublin City University, Room H122J, Dublin 9, Ireland

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Social Work, University of Manitoba, R3T 2N2, Winnipeg, MB, Canada

from afar (Perry 2012). Similarly, ‘second wave abuse’ (violence initiated by a partner but not enacted by them) is another kind of violence concept which challenges traditional definitions (Corbally 2011). Types of second wave abuse included eliciting others to physically abuse the victim, making false accusations of child abuse to the authorities and false claims of IPV to police, all of which, due to the inherent norms within the system, additionally bring about physical and psychological harm to the individual (Corbally 2011, 2014). One of the challenges we argue relates to an overreliance on traditional methodological approaches. This is discussed further below.

### Over Reliance on Traditional Methodological Approaches

Within the IPV research endeavor, we suggest that there has been a methodological overdependence on quantitative surveys in particular. The longstanding gender symmetry versus asymmetry debate within the literature originated from data obtained from a significant corpus of quantitative studies measuring prevalence rates of violent acts. These studies found equal or near equal rates of physical violence being used by both women and men (e.g., Straus 2007, 2008, 2009a). Interestingly, the terms ‘symmetry’ and ‘asymmetry’ allude to an overarching theme, which is circuted around measurement of what is visible. Gender is indeed included on surveys, but largely as a categorical variable wherein respondents are typically asked to tick a box on a questionnaire to report how often they experienced or perpetrated particular violent acts, and another to indicate their gender as female or male. Through this approach, gender is conceptualized as biological sex; an approach that fails to provide sufficient attention to the ways in which gendered identities are socially constructed. On the basis of these findings, assumptions have been made about the nature and dynamics of violence that occurs in heterosexual relationships as not a problem rooted in gender oppression (Anderson 2009), but as one of conflicts that occur in relationships, or an individual problem of psychopathology and dysfunctional behavior (Archer 2000; Dutton and Nicholls 2005; Hamel 2007, 2009). Although findings arising from survey results provide useful information about the prevalence of physical violence, these data alone are insufficient to understand both the complexity and diversity of such relationships. On the other side of the debate, feminist theorists have conceptualized gender as a more complex social construct that materially impacts the lives of women and men differently, yet this approach is used to refer almost exclusively to women’s experiences of IPV (Gaffney and Manno 2011).

Whilst it is a given that methodologies such as surveys bring their own assumptions to bear on studies, we suggest

that given the complexities inherent in understanding IPV, perhaps more diverse research approaches would be useful. The work of Johnson (2008, 2011) was beneficial in broadening conceptualizations of IPV by introducing different typologies, attempting to broaden perspectives and bring together the disparate approaches of feminist informed versus non-feminist informed approaches. Although it could be argued that this work resulted in the creation of a hierarchy of perpetration behaviors, it illustrates and attempts to address the inherent complexities of IPV. Further, there is no consistent theoretical approach to gender across the different typologies of violent relationships, as some descriptions explain how some men and their partners are influenced by unequal gender relations, while others do not (Anderson 2009). Through this paper, we deepen this discussion and outline how broader interpretive research approaches (such as biographical methods, auto ethnography and narrative analysis for example) have the potential to be beneficial in enhancing the quality of data within the IPV research community. Additionally, we explore how they might contribute to understanding more about the nature of physical partner violence, and how men and women relate their own life story to wider societal metanarratives (see for example Corbally 2014).

### Minimization of Alternative Theoretical Perspectives to Understanding IPV

The second aspect of this paper is concerned with how the predominance of particular theoretical standpoints have resulted in the minimization of alternative theoretical perspectives and viewpoints. Male victimization within relationships could be equated to a ‘fundamental novelty’ (Kuhn 1970), which threatens the basic commitment of IPV researchers attached to gendered assumptions regarding power and control in societies. Evidence of denial and minimization of the problem of male victimization within studies been identified on several occasions (e.g., Straus 2009b, 2010). Whilst this is clearly concerning, it serves to illustrate the strength of feeling by academics and researchers wedded to their idea of ‘truth’ regarding IPV perpetration and victimization. One area that is not contested relates to the fact that physical violence against women results in more severe physical injury relative to men who experience physical victimization (Winstock 2011). The visibility of physical injury we suggest legitimizes the plight of female victims as providing visual proof of their experience which can be measured. The physicality is an important factor here – particularly where men are concerned. This is where challenges of legitimacy come to the fore and the paradox of male victimization becomes more apparent. Men are generally (visibly) physically bigger, stronger and have the potential to inflict more physical (and thus visible) injury on women who are in general physically (and visibly) smaller and weaker.

This, we believe is what fosters an asymmetrical ‘mirage’ of harm, equating the physical as most ‘legitimate’ form of IPV. That which is not visible (e.g., psychological abuse and minor injuries) experienced by both men and women continues to carry less legitimacy within societies. This is in spite of the fact that both men and women claim that psychological abuse is often rated as more damaging by victims (Krug et al. 2002).

Within the IPV literature, Winstock (2011) usefully points out that a ‘paradigmatic cleavage’ has resulted from competing discourses with differing assumptions, particularly where gender is concerned. However, unlike Winstock, we do not suggest that this cleavage is doomed to failure. Rather, we suggest that such ‘paradigmatic anomalies’ (p 30) offer a real opportunity in which to critically revise current assumptions and consider a movement towards a new broader paradigm of understanding focusing on the complex ecologies surrounding people and their relationships.

### What Are the Implications of this Argument?

The implications of continuing to subscribe to a paradigm of understanding based on a predominant methodological perspective (which is largely quantitative), we feel, results in an incomplete perspective of the phenomenon. As the World Health Organization highlights in their report, understanding IPV requires an ‘ecological perspective’ which consists of several layered perspectives (individual, interpersonal, community and societal) (Krug et al. 2002). Studies (Anderson and Umberson 2001; Boonzaier 2008; Corbally 2014; Durfee 2011; LeCouteur and Oxlad 2011) have identified that social relations of race, class, culture and socioeconomic class, in addition to gender, influence the IPV experience. Quantitative studies usually tend to focus on one or two of these perspectives rather than encompassing all four. Although the ‘gender symmetry’ debate clearly focuses on gender prevalence of IPV, there is an irony perhaps in the clear ‘asymmetry’ of research studies of IPV, with quantitative methods of inquiry far exceeding qualitative methods. Given the continued dissonance within the research community, we suggest that the implications of not considering a new broader paradigm is potentially constricting to the growth and development of scholarship in this area.

### Towards a Resolution

In this paper, we call for the widening of the scientific imagination with a view to shifting the competing perspectives towards a new, more inclusive paradigm which is appreciative of the complexities inherent in IPV and the multi-layered factors at play. Movement towards more ‘holistic’

methodologies, which endeavor to explore content, context and life story, have the potential to bridge gaps. This illustrates the complexities inherent in experiencing, perpetrating, help-seeking and responding to this worldwide problem. Also, in relation to the basic concepts, which underpin IPV (e.g., gender, violence, intimacy, family and relationships), we recommend that these concepts be re-visited, given the fact that the meaning of several of these concepts have evolved, particularly given the advances in technology and the globalization of society.

### How the Implementation of the Proposed Resolution Will Affect the Field in the Future?

We suggest that this proposed resolution will positively affect the field of scholarship insofar as it may reduce the academic conflict and help the research community revisit commonly held assumptions, consider solutions and begin the process of acknowledging the uncertainty which exists about aspects of IPV in spite of the current abundance of research. Drawing wisdom from the words of Kuhn (1970), we suggest that:

A new theory, however special its range of application, is seldom or never just an increment to what is already known. Its assimilation requires the reconstruction of prior theory and the re-evaluation of prior fact, an intrinsically revolutionary process that is seldom completed by a single man [sic] and never overnight. (p. 7)

In other disciplines, such as Law and Medicine one contradictory case can force the reexamination of theory, practice and policy. Where IPV is concerned, this does not currently seem to be the case. We would recommend that attention to research that elucidates the complexities, contradictions and nuances of IPV may prove potentially useful in the creation of a more inclusive and incorporative level of understanding. At the end of the day, the ultimate outcome of IPV continues to be felt by unique individuals (women and men) who live complicated lives. We suggest that the research community would benefit from greater mindfulness of diversity and complexities in continuing the important work of scholarship and inquiry into this challenging phenomenon.

**Compliance with Ethical Standards** All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all patients for being included in the study.

**Conflict of Interest** All authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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