Philosophical and Political Issues in Research on Women's Violence and Aggression

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This essay organizes the philosophical and political issues raised by researching women's aggression and violence by posing three questions. What does a research focus on women's violence and aggression offer feminist scholars and activists? What are the potential hazards of such a focus? What are promising directions for research? To focus on women as aggressors and perpetrators as well as victims sheds light on compelling and difficult questions of gender and violence, especially violence and aggression between intimate partners. It also presents some political pitfalls for the most vigilant researchers, including oversimplification and misinterpretation of complex empirical findings. The author concludes with a call for researchers to follow the lead of the ideas and evidence collected in this special issue.

KEY WORDS: gender; intimate partner violence; feminism.

The feminist struggle to politicize men's violence—to view it as rooted primarily in social rather than natural or individual causes, to problematize the link between violence and masculinity, to remove the veil of privacy that has shielded men's violence specifically toward their wives and girlfriends, to promote safety and justice—has been long and difficult. As a result, feminists have been understandably reluctant to acknowledge those instances when women resort to aggression and violence against their intimate partners (except to defend or demand amnesty for women who kill men who have violently abused them). Yet, as the contributions to this special issue make clear, feminism's quest to understand women's subordination as collective, social, and remediable requires investigating seriously social phenomena it might seem preferable to ignore or explain away.

The ideas and evidence collected in this special issue raise three key questions about the philosophical, theoretical, methodological, and political issues in research on women's violence and aggression. First, what does a research focus on women's violence and aggression offer feminists? Second, what are the potential problems or costs of a research focus on women's aggression and violence? Finally, what are some promising directions for future research on the compelling and difficult questions of gender and violence, especially violence and aggression between intimate partners, suggested by a substantive focus on women as aggressors and perpetrators as well as victims? I use these questions to contextualize the contributions to this special issue and the ways they pose or solve important problems of research and policy.

WHAT DOES A FOCUS ON WOMEN'S VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION OFFER FEMINISTS?

By focusing on women's aggression and violence, researchers can develop explanations and interpretations of empirical findings, address important dimensions of difference and dominance among women, improve both measurement and theory, and grapple directly and constructively with issues of women's agency and subordination.

The political debate over the empirical finding of "gender symmetry" in couple violence and

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aggression is based on a deeply problematic inference (Dobash et al., 1992; Kimmel, 2002): because women and men report committing acts of aggression and violence against their intimate partners in similar numbers and with similar frequency (for a meta-analytic review, see Archer, 2000), gender is irrelevant to understanding intimate partner violence. Researchers and critical analysts can use a variety of strategies for showing, on the contrary, that gender profoundly structures both the concepts, propositions, frameworks, and methods of research on violence and aggression, and the capacities, organization, and symbolic meanings of aggression and violence (see Howard & Hollander, 2000, ch. 6).

Each of the contributions to this volume either increases empirical knowledge about violence and aggression in the behavior and lives of both women and men, explores the influence of cultural assumptions about gender (and race, class, and sexuality) on research or behavior or both, or creatively assesses gender as an organizing principle of violence and aggression in couples. In their international review of research, Krahé and her collaborators (Krahé, Bieneck, & Möller, 2005) contextualize descriptive knowledge about intimate partner violence beyond the United States, thus increasing baseline information about the prevalence, frequency, and severity of intimate partner violence and clarifying important issues for theory and research. Sinclair and Frieze (2005) empirically and conceptually develop the notion of "intrusive pursuit" by carefully distinguishing among the several factors (in addition to the sex of the respondent) that shape perception and behavior in couples. Williams and Frieze (2005) map the associations between psychosocial outcomes and patterns of aggression and violence in couples for both women and men, adding considerably to what we know about the cognitive, emotional, and intersubjective aspects of women's aggression and violence. Other contributors to this special issue implicitly or explicitly re-vision the gendered dimensions of frameworks for understanding variation in violence and aggression. Bookwala, Sobin, and Zdaniuk (2005) apply a life course perspective to data from the National Survey of Families and Households, and find significant declines in both women's and men's aggression in couples as they age. Such findings suggest the importance of context for understanding variation in how men and women use what Bookwala et al. (2005) term "confrontational/maladaptive problem resolution techniques" with their intimate

partners. Gormley (2005) applies adult attachment theory, and Kernsmith (2005) addresses the theory of planned behavior, both in efforts to expand explanations of gendered repertoires of behavior in the context of intimate partnerships. All enrich the explanatory power of different research approaches to the empirical findings from family violence surveys on which "gender symmetry" arguments are based.

Another important pay-off of documenting and explaining women's violence and aggression is the degree to which it addresses diversity and power relations among women—a keystone of current feminist scholarship and activism. Three cases—battering in lesbian relationships (Lockhart et al., 1994; West, 2002), girls' violence and aggression (Underwood, 2003; see review by Hadley, 2004), and specifically racist violence and aggression perpetrated by women and girls (Batacharya, 2004)—illustrate the rich yield of taking women's violence seriously. Research on battering in lesbian couples has directed the attention of the feminist and lesbian communities to the realities of a previously hidden group of victims whose needs often go unmet in shelters and other services for battered women. The phenomenon of lesbian battering has also drawn attention to a neglected population of perpetrators who have prompted deep questioning of the ways gender and sexuality organize intimate relationships, power, and violence as well as social policy and programs for batterers (Lobel, 1986; Renzetti, 1992). Researchers assessing the flurry of concern over school-aged girls' violence, gang membership, harassment (including girls' harassment of their perceived or "real" lesbian peers), and increasingly criminalized aggression have shed light on contemporary girlhood, the construction of social problems, and the changing regimes that regulate gender in specific age and class contexts (Alder & Worrall, 2004). Analyzing white, native-born girls' participation in the harassment and murder of immigrant girls of color—and the representation of such cases in the media—reveals important gendered and racialized dimensions of violence and aggression that structure divisions among women (Batacharya, 2004; for a parallel historical analysis, see the account of white women's aggression toward enslaved women of African descent in Davis, 1981).

Researchers can also reap rich theoretical and methodological rewards from a focus on women as aggressors. Researchers disagree on methods for studying gender and intimate partner violence. Several of the contributors to this special issue

note the ways in which contradictory theoretical predictions and inconsistent and counterintuitive empirical findings result from a combination of factors. In addition to the complex variability in women's experiences, there are, for example, difficulties with measurement and conceptualization in the area of violence research (Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Hamby, 2005; Krahé & Berger, 2005), and persistent problems operationalizing gender (Anderson, 2005).

Studies of intimate partner violence still tend to measure gender using a single dichotomous variable to distinguish male from female respondents. This essentialist approach assumes that sex and gender are isomorphic, that masculinity and femininity are "opposite poles of a single dimension," and that gender is "a stable, innate, bipolar property of individuals" (Howard & Hollander, 2000, p. 27). Seemingly counterintuitive results abound. Most famously, male and female respondents report engaging in many forms of verbal and physical abuse against their intimate partners at statistically indistinguishable levels (see Archer, 2000)—the finding that leads to the "gender symmetry" argument noted above (see Kimmel, 2002). The good news is, if you are a feminist arguing against essentialist explanations of violence, the overlap in the distributions of men's and women's verbal and physical aggression in the context of conflicts with intimate partners suggests anatomy is not destiny. The awkward news is, if you are a feminist arguing that intimate partner violence is part of a pattern of men's control and abuse of women, there is a decided lack of reliable survey data to discern what gender (understood as something other than the dichotomous and naturalized distinction between female and male) has to do with it. Dutton and Goodman's concept clarification of "coercive control" in 2005 takes an important step toward remedying this problem by carefully specifying the dimensions of coercive control and their connections to gender, aggression, and violence. Hamby (2005) places research questions of measuring gender differences in couple violence in the context of other forms of aggression, generating criteria for a "gold standard" in partner violence measurement. But it is Anderson's telling critique of conceptualizations of gender (2005) that most directly draws researchers' attention to the question of how most appropriately to theorize and measure gender.

Feminists have long itemized the problems of instruments developed in victimization surveys and family conflict studies. In addition to Hamby (2005) and Krahé & Berger (2005), see for example Brush (1990), DeKeseredy and MacLean (1990), Desai and Saltzman (2001), Johnson (1995), Kimmel (2002), and Smith (1994). My concern here is with an important but surprisingly neglected question, raised with particular urgency and eloquence by Anderson's contribution to this special issue: *How should intimate partner violence researchers conceive of and measure gender as designating something more than the dichotomous distinction between male and female?* Psychologists have developed instruments to measure variation in gender role identity or self-concept, gender stereotyped behaviors, and gender ideologies (for recent reviews and summaries of validation studies, see Choi & Fuqua, 2003; Lippa, 2001; Smiler, 2004). Examples include the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1974), the Children's Sex Role Inventory (Boldizar, 1991), the Personal Attributes Questionnaire and Attitudes to Women (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974) and the Extended Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence, Helmreich, & Holahan, 1979), and the Gender Role Behavior Scales (Athenstaedt, 2003). Unfortunately, instruments that assess masculinity and femininity as variable traits, roles, attitudes, schemas, stereotyped behaviors, or ideologies (or a combination of these) are seldom included in surveys on victimization, mental health, or relationships that also measure verbal and physical aggression, violence, or abuse.

A partial exception has been research on rape and sexual aggression. Researchers have developed numerous instruments or assessing variations in gendered attitudes in that context; examples include the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence, Adversarial Sexual Beliefs, Rape Myth Acceptance, Sex Role Conservatism, and Sex Role Stereotyping measures (Burt, 1980); the Dominance/Power Over Women, Hostile Masculinity, and Attraction to Sexual Aggression Scale (Malamuth, 1986, 1989a, 1989b); and the Hypermasculinity measure (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984). A meta-analytic review of research on the association between negative, hostile beliefs about women and sexual aggression found that hostile masculine ideology is moderately associated with sexual aggression but "possession of patriarchal attitudes toward women is not sufficient to perpetuate [sexually aggressive] behavior" (Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002, p. 370). In addition, two surveys on violence against women in Canada found that men who adhere more strongly to patriarchal ideology are more likely to abuse their wives (Lenton, 1995;

Smith, 1990). But the two most important sources of generalizable data on intimate partner violence—crime victimization surveys and family conflict studies—virtually never include measures of adherence to patriarchal attitudes, conformity to what Connell (1995) called "hegemonic masculinity," or other, more complex notions of gender. This is the heart of Anderson's critique (2005), and her points are very well taken.

It is no longer being male or female *per se* which feminist scholars and activists associate with propensity for violence (against intimate partners or otherwise; see Frieze, 2005). Rather, as Dutton and Goodman (2005) and Anderson (2005) suggest, what probably matters most is the degree to which men and women adhere to a belief system that poses control, abuse, and violence as acceptable responses to difference in general and that grants license to punish feminized social actors in particular (see Johnson, 1997). Of course, in a male-dominant gender system, men are more likely to adhere to such beliefs and apply them to their own behavior, as they are more likely to be in a privileged position to act on and receive the entitlements of masculinity than women are. In a society where anatomy, identity, and behavior must neatly match up, men are also more likely to assume the masculine subject position and to be rewarded for doing so. Even more importantly, the consequences of adhering to patriarchal values are asymmetrical for women and men. Women are endorsing their own subordination when they conform to normative femininity, especially when they affirm normative femininity by suffering men's conformity to hegemonic masculinity. Men are enforcing their own dominance when they conform to hegemonic masculinity, especially when they reinforce hegemonic masculinity by policing women's conformity to normative femininity. What matters, fundamentally, is the combination (in a given couple) of men's and women's conformity or nonconformity to their respective gender norms, including expecting or enforcing conformity from each other. Williams and Frieze (2005) take an interesting step in a related direction in their analysis of the specificities of men's and women's expectations for and responses to relationships that may include aggression as part of the affective charge of the couple's connection. Determining what researchers should do with the possibility that this response pattern may involve women's eroticisation of violently-enacted dynamics of dominance and subordination is one of the key puzzles raised by this research.

It has become commonplace to conceptualize gender as practice or performance rather than trait (Butler, 1993; Schippers, 2002; West & Zimmerman, 1987), as the context-specific product of inter-subjective interactions rather than stable attitudes (Athenstaedt, Haas, & Schwab, 2004; Pickard & Strough, 2003), and as organizing principle in complex organizations and social, economic, and political institutions (Ferree, Lorber, & Hess, 1999). Nevertheless, as Anderson (2005) rightly points out, there is little consensus on how to measure gender as an emergent property of interaction in a couple. Even substantively complementary studies of women and men such as Arendell (1995) and Kurz (1995) on divorce or Gerson (1985, 1993) on balancing work and family offer little in terms of strategies for measuring gender. Despite longstanding calls from critical race feminists (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991), the focus on gender (and race) as both relational and institutional, both material and symbolic, that frames recent syntheses of feminist scholarship has yet to be translated from historical case studies (e.g., Nakano Glenn, 2002) into research on intimate partner violence, whether perpetrated by men or women. Hamby (2005), Anderson (2005), and Dutton and Goodman (2005) all move this discussion forward through their careful and contextualized focus on women's violence and aggression.

Finally, research designed to describe and explain women's aggression and violence can move feminists toward realistic rejection of pacifist assumptions and victim stereotypes of women and toward complex empirical and political assessments of women's agency. Gormley (2005) and Kernsmith (2005), in particular, each contribute in this volume to an important tradition of viewing women's aggression as active coping or survival strategy (see also Sev'er, 2002). Studying women as aggressors and perpetrators of violence enables researchers to counter empirically and avoid reproducing the stereotypical passivity of women that "permits men to maintain power and dominance over women by fostering fear and dependence in women" (Howard & Hollander, 2000, p. 146). As McCaughey puts it, "We have been so busy analyzing women's victimization by men's aggression that we have almost reified men's power to coerce women physically, failing to highlight women's potential for fighting back" (1997, p. 12). The contributions to this special issue help ensure that feminists will not fall into that trap.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL COSTS OF A RESEARCH FOCUS ON WOMEN'S AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE?

In addition to all it offers to feminists, there are some potential costs of focusing on women as aggressors and violent perpetrators. The costs are mostly political, and spring from two main sources. First, there is the unavoidable necessity of tying research to recognizable frameworks (and, often, data sources and funding streams). Virtually by definition, such frameworks are much more likely to confirm or reproduce than challenge conventional wisdom. The dilemma of using a research instrument with demonstrated measurement properties (such as the Conflict Tactics Scale) when it inevitably reproduces problematic assumptions about aggression and violence (for instance, by conflating disagreement and conflict with power and control) is typical. Dutton and Goodman (2005) and Hamby (2005) go considerable distance toward addressing this dilemma, which Krahé and Berger (2005) also address in their discussion. However, serious political problems are likely to continue to plague feminist research on women as aggressors and perpetrators of violence in intimate partnerships because of the structural dynamics and constraints of how research and the production and presentation of new knowledge are organized in contemporary academic and policy contexts. Normal science—the practice conforming most closely to familiar paradigms and methods and therefore most likely to be funded and published—tends inherently to conserve the status quo in measurement and interpretation, with important implications for feminist research.

Second, there is the danger of hostile oversimplification and misappropriation of nuanced research results. Feminist researchers have to be vigilant about countering the ways anti-feminist pundits and policy-makers take findings out of context, extrapolate inappropriately, and misuse insights about the complexities of lived experience to undermine precarious public support for battered women and shelter funding. When misappropriated by anti-feminists, a focus on women's aggression and violence can take the emphasis off the combination of gendered structure and agency behind two salient facts: most violence and aggression in most contexts are directed by men at other men, and women's risk for violent victimization is highest in the context of heterosexual couples (Frieze, 2005). The leap from a finding that women aggress in a significant proportion of couples to an assumption of "gender symmetry" and from there to a "battered husband syndrome" which requires a response at the expense of services for battered women is politically motivated; the needs of women and men who are targets of abuse from their intimate partners need not be zero-sum. It is a frustrating reality that a research focus on women's aggression and violence can inadvertently fuel threats to funding and services to battered women, especially when anti-feminism is paired with conservative attacks on social provision.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Understanding the philosophical and political issues raised by research on women's aggression and violence helps feminists map promising directions for future research on intimate partner violence. Two related points seem especially salient. The first is the issue of setting an agenda for feminist research (and prospecting for federal research funds) in an era of highly politicized debates over science, gender, and the state. Tempting as it may seem, feminists cannot just hunker down and withdraw from either research or public debate while the political and funding climates are hostile. Researchers have to make the intellectual case for innovative approaches driven by theory and shaped by deep engagement with empirical materials. This is precisely the stance of the articles published in this special issue. Hamby (2005), with her suggestions for measuring gender differences in intimate partner violence, and Anderson (2005), with her careful assessment of the conceptualization and measurement of gender itself, offer particularly promising avenues for exploration. But all of the contributors have clearly taken up the gauntlet, and our knowledge and prospects for the future are richer for it.

The second is the issue of research models and policy-oriented data collection, especially for researchers from outside the United States facing a torturous choice. They can adopt credible instruments and frameworks at the cost of reproducing distracting political debates. Or, they can contemptuously dismiss the quantitative project at the cost of relinquishing prevalence estimates as a mobilizing tool. On the one hand, methodological bigotry will get feminists nowhere. On the other hand, doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different outcome is the definition of "crazy." Colleagues who are taking up research questions about the prevalence,

frequency, and severity of intimate partner violence in countries without the research tradition that in the United States produced the problematic debates over "gender symmetry" as the hegemonic response to evidence of women's aggression and violence can at least be forewarned of some of the pitfalls they are likely to encounter. Krahé and her collaborators (Krahé et al., 2005; Krahé & Berger, 2005) demonstrate a commitment to navigating this difficult route toward future contributions.

Clearly, feminists have to be able to command the research resources to integrate better concepts related to abuse (such as Dutton and Goodman's focus on coercive control in their contribution to 2005) as well as measures of gender (as a variable set of social relations shaped by interaction, for instance, rather than a dichotomous, stable marker of difference) into both crime victimization and family conflict and other community surveys as well as into clinical and qualitative research. Fruitful research, theory, and practice have to specify the ways dominant notions of masculinity and femininity produce meanings, behaviors, incentives, culture, and resources related to aggression and violence. At the level of both the dyad and the bureaucratic apparatus of the state, conforming to gender expectations carries differential rewards and consequences for women and men. One methodological strategy to get at the interactive and institutional organization of violence and aggression might be to study constellations of gendered attributes and actions within couples to determine necessary and sufficient combinations associated with aggression by one, the other, or both members of a couple. Doing so is just one possible way to make the most of the benefits (and perhaps avoid the pitfalls) of attending to women's aggression and violence as carefully as do the contributors to this special issue.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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