**Intimate Partner Violence**

**Definition**
Intimate partner violence refers to the intentional use of aggressive behaviors that are enacted with the immediate goal of causing physical pain to an intimate partner. If the pain is caused accidentally (e.g., by inadvertently shutting a door on the partner's fingers), it does not qualify as intimate partner violence. This entry focuses specifically on physical violence in romantic relationships; it does not address psychological aggression.

Virtually all intimate partner violence is instrumental, in that the partner's pain is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Regardless of whether violence is motivated by the desire to control the partner's behavior in the argument at hand, to gain justice or retribution, or to defend one's self-image, it typically is not random or sadistic. As such, intimate partner violence is best conceptualized as a (conscious or nonconscious) goal-directed social influence tactic, albeit an extreme one with deeply disturbing consequences for victims.

**Frequency**
Physical violence is perpetrated against romantic partners with alarming frequency. According to a nationally representative survey conducted in 1985, for example, 16.1% of married couples in the United States experienced an incident of violence during the previous year. When the definition of violence is limited to include only severe violence perpetration (e.g., kicking, beating up, using a knife or gun), incidence remains high at 6.3%. Moreover, intimate partner violence is not limited to married couples; evidence suggests that perpetration rates might be even higher among unmarried dating couples.

**Two Types of Intimate Partner Violence**
Until the mid-1990s, researchers investigating intimate partner violence in heterosexual romantic relationships found themselves embroiled in a heated controversy over whether such behavior is best characterized as (a) a phenomenon in which men batter women in the interest of exerting control or dominance or (b) a gender-neutral phenomenon in which men or women sometimes become aggressive toward their partner during heated conflict. Although this controversy is far from resolved, researchers have recently brought some coherence to the literature by developing typologies to distinguish between qualitatively distinct categories of intimate partner violence.

One prominent typology suggests that there are two types of intimate partner violence in Western countries: intimate terrorism and situational couple violence. Intimate terrorism (or patriarchal terrorism) is argued to be a product of cultural traditions that bequeath to men the right to control “their” women, with violence serving to exert and maintain control. In couples characterized by intimate terrorism, violence tends to (a) be perpetrated predominantly by men, (b) occur chronically, (c) increase in severity over time, and (d) be unidirectional (i.e., the victim typically does not fight back). In contrast, situational couple violence (or common couple violence) is a nonescalating and frequently bidirectional form of physical violence that arises occasionally when conflictual situations get out of hand. Unlike intimate terrorism, there do not appear to be substantial gender differences in the likelihood of perpetrating situational couple violence. Nonetheless, female victims are more likely to be injured or killed, in part...
because of males' greater physical strength.

The causal mechanisms underlying intimate terrorism relate to psychopathology and patriarchal socialization practices, topics that have been systematically studied in disciplines (e.g., clinical psychology, sociology) other than social psychology. After all, social psychologists typically investigate social dynamics in normal (nondeviant) populations. The causal mechanisms underlying situational couple violence, in contrast, relate to interpersonal conflict, impulsiveness, and behavioral restraint, topics that fall squarely in the domain of social psychology. The remainder of this entry focuses on social psychological research relevant to understanding the perpetration of situational couple violence.

**Conceptual Analysis of Situational Couple Violence**

Researchers must ask three general questions regarding a given interaction between romantic partners to determine whether situational couple violence is likely to transpire. First, are the partners experiencing conflict with one another? Second, does either partner experience impulses toward intimate partner violence as a result of this conflict? And third, does that person exhibit weak behavioral restraint?

Many scholars have concluded that conflict is inevitable in romantic relationships. Jacob may speak disrespectfully toward Monica when he is trying to quit smoking, or Monica might become jealous when Jacob goes out for dinner with his ex-girlfriend, interrogating him aggressively upon his return. Each of these behaviors may cause the partner to become irritated and may ultimately ignite relationship conflict. Although experiencing relationship conflict may be inevitable in romantic relationships, intimate partner violence as a tactic for dealing with this conflict is not.

Relationship conflict typically does not cause partners to experience violent impulses. Such impulses, however, are not unheard of, and certain risk factors render them more likely. Factors that increase the likelihood that the experience of conflict leads a given partner to experience violent impulses include features of the immediate situation (e.g., experiencing anger or humiliation), the relationship (e.g., relationship commitment, power/control dynamics), the potential perpetrator's personality (e.g., dispositional hostility or narcissism), and the potential perpetrator's background characteristics (e.g., exposure to parental violence).

Even if partners experience violent impulses in response to relationship conflict, they will only act on these impulses if they exhibit weak behavioral restraint (or if they believe that intimate partner violence is acceptable, which is relatively rare in situational couple violence). Factors that increase the likelihood that experiencing violent impulses will lead to violent behavior include features of the immediate situation (e.g., impulsiveness, alcohol consumption, experiencing life stressors) and of the potential perpetrator's personality (e.g., low self-control, belief that violence is acceptable).

**See also**

Aggression; Anger; Close Relationships; Frustration–Aggression Hypothesis

**Further Readings**

- Johnson, M. P. Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: Two forms of violence against


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