Established and Emerging Perspectives on Violence in Intimate Relationships

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ABSTRACT - We provide a critical review of established and emerging perspectives on violence in intimate relationships. First, we review two broad theoretical perspectives that have guided most previous empirical work on partner violence. Feminist perspectives focus on how the patriarchal system contributes to men’s violence against women. Psychological perspectives focus on background and personality variables that put some individuals at risk for becoming violent toward their intimate partners. Next, we review recent interactional perspectives that examine dyadic and situational contexts in which partner violence arises. Dyadic perspectives focus on how partner abuse arises from the interaction of both partners’ characteristics and how this interaction unfolds over time. Situational perspectives focus on the specific situational contexts in which episodes of abuse arise, including consideration of factors that inhibit and disinhibit aggression toward an intimate partner. We then describe several multi-factor models that integrate multiple perspectives on partner violence, and we consider the implications of the various perspectives for prevention and treatment of partner abuse. Finally, we highlight promising directions for future research on partner violence.

Violence against partners is alarmingly common in heterosexual marital relationships (e.g., 16 percent prevalence in a year’s time; Straus & Gelles, 1990) and even more common in dating, same-sex, and cohabiting relationships (e.g., Straus, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2005). The most common forms of partner violence (PV) are occasional pushing and shoving during an argument; the most severe and fortunately least common forms of PV are acts of injurious violence, such as beating up or attacking a partner with a weapon (e.g., Archer, 2002; Statistics

Canada, 2005). We define PV as any non-consensual physical aggression against a romantic partner.

We review two broad theoretical perspectives that have guided most previous empirical work on PV. Feminist perspectives focus on the patriarchal system in which violence against women occurs, conceptualizing PV as a means by which men maintain domination over women. Psychological perspectives focus on background and personality factors that put some individuals at risk for becoming violent toward their intimate partners. We examine the basic principles underlying these perspectives, and where relevant, question the validity of these principles. Next, we describe recent interactional perspectives that focus on dyadic and situational contexts in which PV arises. We then describe several multi-factor models that integrate multiple perspectives on PV and provide guidelines for future research. We emphasize the need for researchers to consider how cultural factors are linked to individual, dyadic, and situation mediators of PV. Finally, we consider the implications of the various perspectives on PV for prevention and treatment, and we highlight promising directions for future research.

Established Perspectives on Partner Violence

Feminist Perspectives

Feminist perspectives on PV focus on the patriarchal structure of society—in which men control resources and women are systematically kept in a subordinate position—as the fundamental cause of male violence against women (Bograd, 1988; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Dragiewicz & Lindgren, 2009). The patriarchal structure is reflected in traditional gender attitudes and roles that affirm the dominance of men over women in a range of social institutions, including the institution of marriage. Men are socialized to believe that they are entitled to assert control over their female partners and, further, that violence is an acceptable means of enforcing that control. This gender-based analysis of PV was originally formulated in the 1970’s based on qualitative interviews with women in domestic violence shelters. Feminist perspectives were instrumental in generating awareness of violence against women, and they continue to be highly influential in forming societal views of PV and in guiding public policy and domestic violence services. Adherents to this perspective refer to it as the feminist perspective on PV, emphasizing that feminist principles guide their analysis. However, some researchers in the PV field have pointed out that this label has sometimes been used to brand those who question the premises or conclusions of the perspective as anti-feminist (e.g., Dutton, in press; Ross & Babcock, 2010). Therefore, this perspective also has been referred to as the patriarchal model or the gender-paradigm (Dutton, 2010; Dutton & Nicholls, 2005) or more simply as “traditional theories” on PV (e.g., Ehrensaft, 2008).

There are multiple forms of feminist thought and research, many of which acknowledge that patriarchy is not the only cause of PV (DeKeseredy, 2011). However, “all feminists prioritize gender” (DeKeseredy, 2011, p. 299), and this perspective is guided by the assumption that PV is primarily a gender-based sociological problem, rather than a psychological or relationship problem. Thus, PV is viewed as men’s abuse of women to maintain and enforce women’s subjugation. This perspective further assumes distinct perpetrator and victim roles in relationships that involve violence. Moreover, PV is considered just one tactic in a general relationship dynamic in which male perpetrators coercively control their female partners. Thus, PV is viewed as an instrumental behavior aimed at asserting and maintaining control over a partner.
Feminist perspectives on PV are problematic, particularly as applied in Western contexts, where the vast majority of research has been conducted. Contrary to the assumption that patriarchal values structure all gender relations, most marriages are relatively equal in power (e.g., Coleman & Straus, 1990). In fact, recent evidence suggests that women are more likely than men to dominate decision making in marriage, even in marital relationships in which men make more money (Morin & Cohn, 2008). Furthermore, contrary to the assumption that male violence enforces male domination of women, a growing body of research suggests that male violence against women is more likely when men lack equal power in their intimate relationships (e.g., Anderson, 1997; Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993; Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 1999). Thus, PV may be an ineffective means of trying to compensate for a perceived lack of equal relationship influence. Other research suggests that relationships in which either partner dominates decision making, regardless of gender, are prone to violence by both partners, suggesting that lack of equity contributes to marital distress and perhaps to a struggle for influence (Coleman & Straus, 1990).

Contrary to the feminist perspective, the assumption that violence against women is a societal norm lacks empirical support in Western societies. Rather, condemnation of male violence against women, regardless of context, is the norm (e.g., Simon et al., 2001). Further, only a minority of men are violent, which would not be the case if violence against women were normative (Dutton, 1994). In contrast, women and men are much more accepting of women’s violence against men than the converse (Simon et al., 2001). On the other hand, there is an association between attitudes relatively more accepting of PV and men’s perpetration of PV (Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004). However, it is not clear whether these attitudes are causally related to PV or are an attempt at justifying past violence. As well, the research linking traditional or patriarchal gender attitudes and roles with PV perpetration is mixed at best (Sugarman & Frankel, 1996). Moreover, male violence against partners is negatively associated with masculine gender schemas (e.g., Sugarman & Frankel, 1996) and with traditionally masculine traits of self-confidence and independence (e.g., Murphy, Meyer, & O’Leary, 1994).

Overall, there is limited empirical support in Western societies for the proposition that men internalize and then act on social norms asserting men’s entitlement to dominate their female partners through force; however, there is cross-cultural support for this proposition. The most compelling evidence in support of the feminist perspective is data indicating that rates of women’s victimization are associated with lower levels of women’s empowerment in a society relative to men’s, stronger societal endorsement of traditional gender roles, and greater societal acceptance of husbands hitting wives (Archer, 2006). When available, the data suggest that women’s attitudes are at least as predictive as are men’s attitudes of levels of PV against women, suggesting the importance of societal norms shared by both genders.

Not only do some of the assumptions and predictions of the feminist perspective fail to hold up under empirical scrutiny, but this conceptualization of PV cannot easily account for much of the established data describing the nature of PV in Western societies. In unselected samples, women are as likely to be violent in their intimate relationships as are men (Archer, 2000; Fiebert, 2010), including perpetrating severe forms of violence (Straus, 2011). Only a small percentage of women’s violence can be ascribed to self-defense against abusive male partners (e.g., Carrado George, Loxam, & Jones, 1996; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998), women are at least as likely as men to initiate PV (e.g., Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2005), and somewhat more women than men aggress against non-violent partners (e.g., Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007; Straus, 2011). Although the data on motives for violence
are complex and at times contradictory (due in part to different methods and samples), there is no consistent evidence that women’s motives for violence differ systematically from men’s motives. Rather, women and men report a broad range of motives for violence, including anger, retaliation, to get through to a partner, and to make a partner do, or stop doing, something (e.g., Carrado et al., 1996; Fiebert & Gonzalez, 1997; Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd, & Sebastian, 1991).

Also problematic for the feminist perspective is a large body of evidence indicating that in at least half of relationships with violence, both partners report acting violently (e.g., Anderson, 2002; Whitaker et al., 2007). Further, the higher the level of one partner’s violence (and abuse more generally), the higher the level of the other partner’s violence (e.g., Bartholomew, Regan, White, & Oram, 2008; Fergusson et al., 2005; Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi, Newman, Fagan, & Silva, 1997). Moreover, the most severe violence and the greatest risk of injury are in relationships with bi-directional abuse (e.g., Anderson, 2002; Whitaker et al., 2007). The pattern of PV identified by the original feminist perspective—one-sided and severe male-to-female violence—is actually the least common pattern of PV in Western societies (Stets & Straus, 1992). Finally, perspectives that focus on the gendered nature of PV cannot explain the high rates of violence in same-sex relationships (e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2008; Lie, Schilit, Bush, & Montagne, 1991). If gender inequality and men’s subjugation of women underlie PV, why would same-sex romantic partners act violently toward one another?

Women are more likely than men to be severely affected by PV in heterosexual relationships. In adult samples, women are more likely than men to report fearing a violent partner (e.g., Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) and suffering psychological distress as a result of PV (e.g., Williams & Frieze, 2005; Anderson, 2002). Women are also about twice as likely as men to report being injured by PV (Archer, 2000). Although these are meaningful gender differences, men also experience fear and negative psychological effects from PV and about a third of victims of severe PV are men victimized by women. As well, the gender differences in fear and injury shrink and even disappear in samples of young adults, the group with the highest rate of PV (e.g., Capaldi & Owen, 2001; Fergusson et al., 2005). The reasons for the gender difference in consequences of PV are unclear; however, there is no compelling evidence that women are more negatively affected by PV because their victimization takes place in a relationship context in which they are systematically threatened and controlled. Given the data indicating that severe PV and injury are most common in mutually violent relationships, a plausible alternative explanation is that men are larger and stronger on average than women, and therefore more capable of inflicting harm.

To reconcile the feminist analysis of PV with conflicting data from large-scale community samples, Johnson (1995) proposed two distinct forms of PV. Patriarchal terrorism (relabeled intimate terrorism), found primarily in agency samples, conforms to the feminist image of PV—men subjugating female partners with severe, unilateral violence as part of a general pattern of patriarchal control. Common couple violence is primarily reported in community samples—lower-level, often mutual PV that is equally perpetrated by both genders and reflects problematic conflict management. Thus, Johnson concluded that women are the victims in the large majority of the most egregious cases of PV.

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2 Johnson and Ferraro (2000) subsequently added two additional patterns of PV: mutual violent control (consisting of two violent and controlling partners) and violent resistance (primarily women violently resisting abusive male partners).
Johnson’s (1995) typology has been helpful in highlighting that PV takes a variety of forms. However, the original empirical work supporting these distinctions was based only on women’s reports, even when men were included in the samples (e.g., Johnson & Leone, 2005). Though subsequent studies confirm that different samples have different patterns of abuse, they suggest a more complex picture that does not break down along the gender lines proposed by Johnson. In general population studies applying Johnson’s criteria for intimate terrorism (a spouse who is both violent and controlling), about as many women as men qualify as intimate terrorists (Laroche, 2005; Graham-Kevan, 2007b). In agency samples of abused women, the patterns of abuse often fail to conform to the patriarchal pattern. Even in samples identified for high rates of female victimization, the majority of women also report perpetrating severe PV against their male partners (e.g., McDonald, Jouriles, Tart, & Minze, 2009), and the more severe the male PV, the more severe the female PV (Straus, 2011). Finally, contrary to Johnson’s expectations, community samples include significant numbers of individuals who report severe PV, which is equally perpetrated by women and men, most often in relationships with mutual abuse (e.g., Ehrensaft, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2004).

In summary, the feminist perspective on PV has been important in identifying the problem of PV and in highlighting the potential role of gender in understanding such violence. The perspective continues to be influential, but many of the perspective’s basic premises have not withstood empirical scrutiny: The feminist perspective fails to account adequately for most of the violence occurring in Western intimate relationships. Unfortunately, researchers working from this perspective have not always been quick to adapt their thinking in response to new data or to incorporate into their models other factors that may play a role in PV. However, in the last decade there has been a growing acknowledgement of data that are inconsistent with the traditional feminist perspective on PV (Frieze, 2008). See Dutton and Corvo (2006), Dutton and Nicholls (2005), and Dutton (2006) for more detailed critiques of the feminist perspective on PV.

**Individual Psychological Perspectives**

Sociocultural explanations may be helpful in identifying broad social contexts that foster or inhibit aggression in close relationships. However, they cannot explain why, in a given society, only a minority of men aggress violently against female partners (Dutton, 1994). In all demographic groups studied (e.g., based on ethnicity, class, or education level), a relatively small minority of men commit PV (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Therefore, researchers working from individual psychological perspectives reject the assumption that the cause of PV is primarily situated in social structure and norms. While acknowledging the potential role of the broader cultural context, these researchers seek to identify and understand background, personality, and social-cognitive factors that put individuals more or less at risk for perpetrating PV. Informed by the experience of clinicians working with violent individuals, PV is considered a dysfunctional behavior stemming from individual vulnerabilities. The hypothesis guiding much of the individually focused research on PV is that socialization experiences, in conjunction with dispositional tendencies, affect adult social-emotional functioning and, in turn, individuals’ risk for PV perpetration. Initial work from an individual perspective did not question the traditional framing of PV as being male violence towards women. Thus, much of this research has addressed why, in the same cultural context, some men aggress against their female partners whereas other men do not. Over time, as the data indicated that PV was not the sole purview of men in spousal relationships, the question expanded to include why members of both genders
perpetrate PV.

Individual factors related to PV perpetration can be grouped into family background, personality or dispositional factors, and psychopathology. A large body of research indicates that individuals who observe or experience violence in their families of origin are at increased risk for future PV (e.g., Kwong, Bartholomew, Henderson, & Trinke, 2003), although the magnitude of these associations is generally small. Similarly, problematic parenting and various forms of child maltreatment modestly predict future PV (for a review, see Ehrensaft, 2009). Associations between childhood experiences and adult PV may reflect, at least in part, social learning processes whereby children learn to use aggression to deal with conflicts of interest. As expected from social learning principles, PV is associated with more accepting attitudes regarding violence in close relationships (Stith et al., 2004) and with poor communication and problem-solving skills (e.g., Anglin & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1997). As well, less than ideal early experiences may adversely affect children’s emotional and social development, thus increasing subsequent difficulties regulating negative affect and developing close, trusting relationships. Consistent with this hypothesis, PV is associated with individual-difference variables indicative of emotional vulnerability and reactivity, especially in the context of close relationships. Established dispositional correlates of PV include low self-esteem, interpersonal dependency, anxious attachment, aggressive tendencies, and hostile attribution biases (Dutton, 2006). Not surprisingly, PV perpetration is also associated with various psychological disorders including personality disorders (notably Borderline and Antisocial), mood disorders (notably depression, anxiety), and substance use disorders (Dutton, 2006; Stith et al., 2004).

Much of this body of work has continued the traditional focus on male aggression toward female partners, providing considerable insight into the backgrounds and psychological makeup of male perpetrators of PV. However, researchers working from this perspective are increasingly considering the characteristics of both genders in various relationship contexts. Although much work remains to be done, preliminary findings suggest similarities in the predictors of men’s and women’s PV, dating and marital PV, and perpetration and receipt of PV (this is not surprising, given the strong cross-partner associations on violence perpetration) (e.g., Charles, Whitaker, Le, Swahn, & DiClemente, 2011; Medeiros, & Straus, 2007; Roberson & Murachver, 2007; White, Merrill, & Koss, 2001). For example, initial studies applying an attachment perspective to PV demonstrated links between male partners’ anxious attachment and aggression toward female partners in samples identified for severe spousal violence (e.g., Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew, 1994; Holtzworth-Munroe, Stuart, & Hutchinson, 1997). Subsequent studies suggested that this pattern holds for dating couples, community samples, women’s violence against male partners, men’s violence toward male partners, and perpetration and receipt of PV (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006).

However, some gender differences are emerging in two areas. First, prospective studies suggest that young men who perpetrate PV may have higher levels of psychopathology than young women perpetrators (e.g., Ehrensaft et al., 2004), as might be expected given that men’s PV is less socially acceptable than is women’s PV. Second, initial research suggests that women arrested for domestic violence may be somewhat higher on psychopathology, personality risk factors for PV, and tolerance for their own violence than men arrested for domestic violence (Simmons, Lehmann, & Cobb, 2008). Again, we believe that such findings stem from gendered attitudes regarding violence: Women’s violence is treated as less serious; therefore the threshold for arrest is likely considerably higher for women than for men, resulting in a more extreme group of female compared to male offenders.
Research that indicates associations between retrospective reports of childhood experiences, dispositional vulnerabilities, and perpetration of PV cannot establish the direction of effects. Some factors that are conceptually understood as predictors of PV may actually be consequences of involvement in abusive relationships. For example, dysfunctional relationships characterized by abuse may undermine attachment security, rather than pre-existing attachment insecurity acting as a risk factor for PV perpetration and receipt. Moreover, causal interpretations of cross-sectional findings tend to reflect untested assumptions about the role of gender in the construction of violent relationships. For example, insecurity, social skills deficits, and problem drinking in men are typically interpreted as contributing to PV, whereas these same psychological variables in women are typically interpreted as resulting from their experiences of abuse (Anglin & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1997; Bartholomew & Allison, 2006).

A handful of prospective longitudinal studies confirm modest associations between childhood adversity and perpetration and receipt of PV in adult relationships (e.g., Ehrensaft et al., 2003). However, the strongest and most consistent predictors of later PV are childhood and adolescent indicators of emotional vulnerability (including neuroticism, depression, and negative emotionality) and conduct problems (e.g., Ehrensaft et al., 2004; Moffitt, Krueger, Caspi, & Fagan, 2000; Woodward, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2002). Although the specific findings of these prospective studies vary (as do the samples and methods), it is striking that early vulnerabilities tend to be equally predictive of men’s and women’s later experiences of PV, whether as perpetrators and/or victims.

Researchers have proposed various typologies of individuals who exhibit PV (for a review, see Graham-Kevan, 2007c). In contrast to initial feminist models that provided a fairly uniform image of men who aggress against women—men with traditional gender roles and attitudes who feel entitled to aggress against spouses to maintain their position of dominance—typology research focuses on the considerable heterogeneity of perpetrators of PV. For example, Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) identified three subtypes of male batterers based on different profiles of background characteristics, personality dimensions, psychopathology, and violence-related attitudes: the family only violent, the dysphoric/borderline, and the generally antisocial and violent. More recently, researchers have extended this approach to identify subtypes of women identified as perpetrating severe PV (e.g., Babcock, Miller, & Siard, 2003; Henning & Feder, 2004). Typological approaches highlight the heterogeneity in background and individual characteristics among PV perpetrators, in some cases incorporating proposed trajectories leading to violence perpetration.

Although typological approaches have been popular in the field of PV, they suffer from a number of limitations: Typologies are difficult to replicate across samples, they imply qualitative differences between subtypes that are not always justified, they fail to account for variability within subtypes, and they generally fail to account for change in violence patterns over time. As well, most perpetrator typologies more or less explicitly link types of offenders with distinct forms of aggression. For instance, antisocial perpetrators engage in instrumental/controlling aggression, whereas borderline perpetrators engage in hostile, reactive aggression. Such simple distinctions are conceptually flawed (Bushman & Anderson, 2001) and obscure the multiple and changing motives that come into play in violent interactions (Capaldi & Kim, 2007). Further, typologies of PV perpetrators maintain a focus on the individual, failing to take into account the dyadic context of PV. Variability in PV predictors is more appropriately reflected by dimensional models that can also accommodate a dyadic focus (cf. Capaldi & Kim, 2007; Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004). For a more detailed critique of violence typologies, see

Individual, psychological perspectives on PV have provided insight into why only some people are violent towards their intimate partners despite similar normative environments. Although research from this perspective has overwhelmingly focused on male perpetration of PV and female victimization, researchers are beginning to address this limitation by examining whether and how the psychological predictors of PV differ by gender of perpetrator and by relationship form. However, psychological perspectives are inherently incomplete because they fail to consider the relational context of PV.

**Current and Emerging Perspectives on Partner Violence**

**Dyadic Perspectives**

Feminist and psychological approaches to PV have typically focused on either perpetrators or victims of PV in isolation; they have failed to take into account that abuse occurs in a relational context and that there is strong mutuality of abuse in many intimate relationships. The single strongest predictor of PV by one partner is psychological or physical aggression by the other partner (e.g., O'Leary & Slep, 2003; White et al., 2001). Dyadic, interactional perspectives on PV are based on the premise that relationships arise from the interaction of enduring characteristics of both partners and how these interactions unfold over time (Kelley et al., 1983). From this perspective, no relational behavior, be it a positive behavior such as support provision or a negative behavior such as PV, can be fully understood without considering the couple system (cf. Reis, Capobianco, & Tsai, 2002). Thus, researchers with dyadic perspectives seek to understand why some relationships are at risk for PV. Some researchers may also take into consideration the psychological makeup of individuals, but they consider both partners in a relationship and examine how individual vulnerabilities predict PV through their effect on relational functioning.

Relationship distress is a consistent correlate of PV (e.g., Williams & Frieze, 2005; Stith et al., 2004), although some couples in relationships with violence are not dissatisfied (Bauerman & Arias, 1992; O'Leary et al., 1989), and the association between distress and PV is likely to be reciprocal (e.g., Lawrence & Bradbury, 2007). Contrary to the stereotype that abusive partners meet their relational needs at the expense of victimized partners, both partners in relationships with PV tend to be dissatisfied (e.g., Williams & Frieze, 2005). In a large sample of men in the U.S. military, marital distress was the strongest predictor of male PV: For every 20% increase in marital distress, the odds of severe PV increased by almost 200% (Pan, Neideg, & O'Leary, 1994). Other relationship factors related to PV are marital discord (e.g., Coleman & Straus, 1990), problem-solving skill deficits (e.g., Anglin & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1997), and non-egalitarian decision-making (regardless of gender), which probably contributes to marital conflict (e.g., Coleman & Straus, 1990). Intrapersonal indicators of relational insecurity and distrust are also associated with PV. Notably, a tendency to make negative attributions for partners’ behavior and to view partners as critical and intentionally hurtful are associated with PV perpetration (e.g., Scott & Straus, 2007).

The dispositions of both partners may interact in predicting PV. For example, Roberts and Noller (1998) found that PV was most common in couples in which one partner reported high attachment anxiety and the other reported high attachment avoidance. They speculated that anxious partners’ demands for closeness and avoidant partners’ withdrawal from these demands
are mutually reinforcing, setting the stage for anxious partners to use violence in a desperate attempt to gain a partner’s attention. Moreover, the relationship context may moderate and mediate the effect of individual PV risk factors. For example, husbands’ hostility and alcohol abuse predict partner abuse, but only within distressed marriages (Leonard & Senchak, 1993), and the effect of individual dispositions on PV tends to be mediated by relationship variables such as marital satisfaction and conflict (e.g., O’Leary, Slep, & O’Leary, 2007).

Correlational studies linking characteristics and feelings of both partners to PV outcomes cannot rule out the possibility that one partner is driving the couple system, while the other partner responds to and is affected by the primary instigator. However, there is growing evidence that both partners’ background characteristics predict future involvement in violent relationships. Negative emotionality (assessed at age 18) predicted PV perpetration and receipt three years later in established heterosexual relationships in a New Zealand birth cohort (Moffitt, Robins, & Caspi, 2001). Moreover, individuals tend to select romantic partners who share risk factors for PV, and then the two partners mutually reinforce each other’s aggressive tendencies. In particular, longitudinal studies indicate a moderate degree of assortative mating on antisocial behavior (Kim & Capaldi, 2004; Krueger, Moffitt, Caspi, Bleske, & Silva, 1998). Further, in this same New Zealand cohort study, each partner’s abuse was equally strongly predicted by their own and their partners’ negative emotionality (Moffit et al., 2001), and the most severely violent relationships at ages 24 to 26 consisted of two partners characterized by adolescent risk factors (Ehrensaft et al., 2004). Research on the stability of PV across relationships also indicates the importance of the relational context of PV. In young adulthood, the rate at which individuals perpetrate PV is more stable within a given relationship than it is when they enter a new relationship (Capaldi & Owen, 2001; Capaldi, Shortt, & Crosby, 2003; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2002).

Perhaps the most direct evidence of the dyadic context of PV comes from research examining interaction and communication processes in violent relationships. With few exceptions (see Capaldi & Crosby, 1997), these studies have focused on spousal relationships characterized by significant male-to-female violence. However, most of the women in these couples are also likely to have perpetrated at least moderately high levels of PV (e.g., Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, Rushe, & Cox, 1993). This is not surprising given the high mutuality of PV and the difficulty of finding couples in which only male partners are violent (presumably because this is the least common pattern of PV in Western cultures). Across a range of methods—including self-reports, observations of at-home and laboratory interactions, and analyses of descriptions of conflict interactions—the findings are remarkably consistent. Couples identified for male violence are distinguished by high levels of hostility by both partners and by high reciprocity of negative affect such as anger, criticism, contempt, and belligerence (e.g., Burman, Margolin, & John, 1993; Cordova et al., 1993; Jacobson et al., 1994). In contrast, satisfied couples tend not to reciprocate negative partner behavior during conflict, thereby avoiding escalation and containing conflict (e.g., Cordova et al., 1993).

Extrapolating from the research reviewed above, it appears that PV is most likely to occur when (1) both members of a couple bring vulnerabilities for aggression to their relationship, (2) the relationship becomes conflictual and distressed, and (3) the partners reciprocate hostile behavior leading to escalation. This dyadic account of PV is consistent with a large body of research examining patterns of aggression in couples’ relationships. Of note, severity of psychological and physical aggression is strongly positively associated across relationship partners (e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2008; Fergusson et al., 2005; Follingstad &
Edmundson, 2010), in short-term longitudinal studies aggression by one partner tends to elicit aggression by the other (e.g., O’Leary & Slep, 2003; Schumacher & Leonard, 2005), and PV is more severe in mutually abusive relationships than in relationships in which only one partner is abusive (e.g., Anderson, 2002; Whitaker et al., 2007). It is striking that these patterns hold in couples selected for severe male-to-female violence. Thus, most women identified as battered report engaging in severe violence (e.g., McDonald et al., 2009), and the female partners of young men arrested for PV report just as high levels of PV perpetration as their male partners (Capaldi et al., 2009).

Dyadic perspectives provide insight into a key factor in understanding PV: the relationship context in which violence arises. However, the body of work applying dyadic perspectives to PV is still very limited compared to the decades of work guided by the more established perspectives, and there are some major gaps in the research base on dyadic processes. Notably, there is almost no information available on dyadic processes in couples selected for severe female-to-male violence or in same-sex couples. In addition, dyadic perspectives yield limited insight into the conditions under which PV actually occurs within relationships.

**Situational Perspectives**

Situational perspectives on PV focus on the contextual and interactional factors that affect the chances of partners acting violently toward one another. The basic assumption underlying this perspective is that a full understanding of PV must address the specific situations in which PV is enacted. A couple may live in a culture that is tolerant of PV, one or both partners may have individual risk factors for engaging in PV, and their relationship may be characterized by distress, insecurity, and entrenched patterns of hostility. However, even in such a scenario, PV does not occur randomly. Even the most frequently and severely violent partner is not violent in all situations. Thus, the unit of analysis becomes specific episodes of violence, including the events and conditions leading up to incidents, the interpersonal process culminating in violence, and the outcomes of violent episodes (Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005).

Data suggest that individual vulnerabilities and situations interact to give rise to aggressive impulses. Traits indicating vulnerability to interpersonal provocation, such as emotional sensitivity and impulsivity, predict aggression only under provoking conditions (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006). For instance, in laboratory studies, partner provocation consistently predicted aggression toward romantic partners only for participants high on dispositional aggressiveness (DeWall et al., 2011; Finkel et al., 2012). Moreover, some of the most robust individual correlates of PV—such as attachment anxiety, sensitivity to rejection, proneness to jealousy, and borderline personality organization—suggest that aggression might be especially likely when vulnerable individuals are faced with the prospect of partner rejection or loss (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006). Consistent with this speculation, Dutton and Browning (1988) found that violent husbands were especially likely to respond with anger to videotaped arguments related to wife abandonment (relative to controls), but not to other forms of couple conflict. Similarly, Holtzworth-Munroe and Anglin (1991) found that violent husbands were distinguished by their inability to provide competent responses to scenarios involving wife rejection.

Qualitative studies of participants’ descriptions of violent incidents also suggest that attachment-related threats are often key in setting the stage for PV (Allison, Bartholomew, Mayseless, & Dutton, 2008; Stanley, Bartholomew, Taylor, Oram, & Landolt, 2006). For
instance, for men in same-sex relationships, most violent conflicts involved either perceived partner rejection or incompatible desires for relational closeness versus autonomy (Stanley et al., 2006). In our collective experience of interviewing hundreds of individuals about their experiences with relationship violence, there always appears to be a precipitating event, most often involving perceptions of emotional threat for one or both partners. The content of the initial conflict may be serious, such as concerns about sexual fidelity, or it may be mundane, such as one partner trying to get the other to do some household duty or to refrain from a perceived unacceptable activity such as watching pornography. Regardless of the precipitating issue, there is generally an underlying theme related to fundamental emotional needs, such as feeling that one’s partner is inattentive and uncaring or that she or he does not respect one’s feelings and contributions.

PV is typically preceded by arguments, suggesting that PV occurs when verbal attempts to resolve couple conflict have failed (e.g., Capaldi, Kim & Shortt, 2007; Cascardi & Vivian, 1995; Hyden, 1995). The relationship context is likely to affect the occurrence and nature of conflict situations. Distressed insecure partners are more likely to engage in conflict and to find conflict situations threatening than are more satisfied secure partners. Further, couples with established patterns of negative communication will find it especially challenging to deal constructively with conflicts. Unfortunately, we know relatively little about the interactional processes in which PV is embedded. Consistent with work indicating that problematic communication patterns are common in couples in which PV occurs, the few studies of interaction processes leading to PV suggest that violence typically follows an escalating pattern of negativity by both partners. In home reenactments of previous conflicts, aggressive couples show high levels of hostile affect and patterns of hostile reciprocity (Burman et al., 1993). Further, individuals overwhelmingly report that their violent behavior follows verbal or physical abuse, or other negative behavior perpetrated by their partner (O’Leary & Slep, 2006). As described by Winstock and Eisikovits (2008), as conflict escalates couples often shift their focus from the precipitating issue to the inappropriate actions of their partner within the conflict and to how to end the conflict situation. Often, couples are unable to recall the specific disagreement that led to the conflict. Needless to say, such conflicts fail to address the inevitable issues that arise in intimate relationships and are likely to further undermine relational trust and security.

In relationships where both partners are violent compared to relationships with only one partner who perpetrates PV, the frequency and severity tends to be greater (e.g., Whitaker et al., 2007). Even when couples have been selected for severe male-to-female violence, partners view their behavior as reactions to each other, and mutual escalation precedes violence (Winstok & Eisikovits, 2008). Women who report severe PV by their partners rarely comply with their partner’s wishes in violent altercations, and most report fighting back physically (e.g., Gondolf & Beeman, 2003; Goodman, Dutton, Weinfurt, & Cook, 2003). Thus, PV generally arises in a context of mutual conflict. Winstock (2007; Winstock & Eisikovits, 2008) argues that labeling one party as perpetrator and the other as victim artificially imposes individual roles on an interactional process. Rather, he suggests shifting the focus from individual roles to how both partners escalate or de-escalate aggression over the course of an interaction.

When feeling provoked, many more individuals experience the impulse to strike out violently against a romantic partner than those who act upon those impulses (Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009). Therefore, Finkel (2007) argues that theory and research should focus on factors that inhibit aggressive impulses in addition to those that impel PV. In particular, attitudes about the unacceptability of PV and expectations about the negative
consequences of PV for the self, the partner, and the relationship may inhibit the expression of PV in conflict situations. We speculate that these inhibiting factors differ by gender. Men may be more likely than women to inhibit PV, and therefore to avoid initiating PV in a conflict situation, because of stronger internalized prohibitions and stronger social and legal sanctions against male PV toward women (e.g., Miller & Simpson, 1991; Sorenson & Taylor, 2005). Consistent with this expectation, in heterosexual relationships women are more likely than men to initiate PV (e.g., Fergusson et al., 2005), to report that they would be violent in response to unacceptable partner behavior (e.g., Feld & Robinson, 1998; Winstok, 2006a), and to be the perpetrators of PV when only one partner is violent (e.g., Whitaker et al., 2007). In contrast, we might predict that women would be more likely than men to inhibit PV out of fear of retaliatory violence by a physically stronger male partner. However, contrary to this expectation, some women report being violent because they know their partner will not reciprocate (Fiebert & Gonzales, 1997), and the majority of women with severely violent partners report fighting back physically (Gondolf & Beeman, 2003; Goodman et al., 2003). Individual differences in PV attitudes and outcome expectations based on experiences in childhood, in previous relationships, and in the current relationship likely also play a role in inhibiting (or failing to inhibit) individuals’ expressions of violent impulses.

Self-regulatory failure may undermine individuals’ capacity to inhibit violent impulses toward intimate partners (Finkel et al., 2009). Various dispositional, relational, and situational factors affect self-regulation. In particular, self-control may be compromised by strong negative emotions in couple conflict (Winstok & Eisikovits, 2008) and by alcohol consumption. A diary study of men in PV treatment indicated that the men’s drinking was strongly associated with the likelihood of PV by both partners on a given day (Fals-Stewart, 2003). In a marital conflict laboratory study, couples in which male partners received alcohol were more verbally negative compared to couples in which male partners received a placebo (Leonard & Roberts, 1998). These studies not only suggest that alcohol disinhibits aggressive impulses, they also demonstrate the power of the interactional system; a change in husbands’ level of intoxication predicts increased negativity by both partners. Other laboratory research suggests that alcohol may increase relational insecurity and hostile partner attributions in men with low-esteem, which then exacerbates conflict (MacDonald, Zanna, & Holmes, 2000). Also, individuals high in dispositional aggressiveness are especially likely to exhibit aggression toward a romantic partner when their self-regulatory capacity is depleted in an experimental paradigm (Finkel et al., 2012). Thus, the likelihood of PV is affected by the interaction between disinhibiting situational factors and individual and relational factors (Slotter & Finkel, 2011).

Situational perspectives on PV hold great potential for providing insight into the specific contexts in which PV is most likely to occur. Consistent with dyadic perspectives, situational perspectives indicate that individual risk factors for PV do not operate in a vacuum. Individuals direct violence against partners only in particular relational contexts and in particular situational contexts. A major challenge of work from this perspective is acquiring valid information on the situations in which PV arises. Qualitative studies of individuals’ and couples’ detailed descriptions of violent episodes, although subject to the limitations of retrospective reports, can provide insight into the contexts of actual violent episodes (e.g., Allison et al., 2008). Moreover, researchers are developing innovative approaches to examining situational factors, including the use of daily diaries and of experimental analogue studies (e.g., Fals-Stewart, 2003; Finkel et al., 2009).
Multi-factor Models

Multi-factor theories of PV incorporate and integrate sociocultural, dyadic, individual, and situational influences on PV. Though models differ in emphasis, all acknowledge that understanding PV requires consideration of multiple levels of analysis, from individual dispositions to the cultural context. As well, multi-factor models allow for variables at different levels of analysis to interact. Given the number and complexity of factors related to PV, rather than specifying specific predictors of PV across social contexts, forms of relationships, and individuals, multi-factor models are heuristic frameworks that provide theoretical coherence to the range of approaches in the PV field and provide guidelines for future research.

The earliest systematic integrative model was Dutton’s (1985) application of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) nested ecological theory to PV. PV risk factors are conceptualized as falling into four nested levels of analysis. The ontogenetic level addresses characteristics that make individuals more or less prone to violence, such as the capacity for emotional regulation and particular learning history. The ontogenetic level is nested within the microsystem, which captures the dyadic and family relationships in which ontogenetic factors are embedded. For example, trust and patterns of communication in a given relationship will interact with an individual’s propensity to jealousy to influence the probability of violence under threatening circumstances. Next, the microsystem is nested within the exosystem, which includes social structures, social networks, and economic conditions within which the family operates. Finally, at the broadest level, the macrosystem refers to the cultural context, including societal norms for gender relations and family violence. As previously reviewed, factors representing each level of the nested ecological theory have relevance for PV. However, variables from the microsystem level and, to a lesser extent, the ontogenetic level are most strongly related to PV (Stith et al., 2004; O’Leary et al., 2007), indicating that more distal factors may influence violence through their effect on more proximal factors.

In another early model of PV, Riggs and O’Leary (1989) distinguished between background factors that influence an individual’s propensity toward aggressive behavior and situational factors that influence the likelihood of conflict and aggressive episodes in a relationship. Background factors include cultural factors such as social norms and individual characteristics such as an individual’s history with violence and personality dispositions. Situational factors that set the stage for violence include relationship problems, substance use, and a partner’s use of violence. The model further proposes that the interaction between background and situational risk factors may affect the risk of PV. For example, individuals high in impulsivity (a background factor) may be at risk for violence, or may be especially at risk of violence, only under provoking conditions such as in response to a partner’s aggression. The background-situational model has guided research predicting men’s and women’s PV in various populations, although the sets of background and situational variables assessed differ across studies. Findings generally indicate that background and situational factors predict PV, with situational factors more strongly predictive (e.g., White, et al., 2001) and mediating the indirect effect of background factors (e.g., O’Leary et al., 2007). Thus, background variables influence PV primarily through their effect on, and perhaps their interaction with, situational variables. However, research based on this framework has not considered how background and situational variables may interact to predict PV perpetration.

Three recent multi-factor models develop further how various predictor variables across levels of analysis work together to predict PV. Finkel’s I3 Theory (2008; Slotter & Finkel, 2011)
identifies three processes through which risk factors affect PV perpetration: instigation, or factors that trigger an urge to aggress; impellance, or factors that influence the degree to which instigating factors lead to urges to aggress; and inhibition, or factors that counteract the urge to aggress. Individuals are most likely to enact violence in a given social interaction when instigating and impelling forces are strong and inhibiting forces are weak. As shown in Figure 1, the major risk factors for PV identified in previous literature are organized in terms of these three processes. For example, in response to strong partner provocation such as an insult or threat to leave the relationship (relational instigators), highly insecure partners who lack trust in their partners’ regard (dispositional and relational impelling factors) may resort to violence if they lack the ability to control their behavior because of high impulsivity and intoxication.


(dispositional and situational disinhibiting factors). $I^3$ Theory thus incorporates interactions between the three processes. Initial research assessing components of the model is promising. For instance, when provoked by a partner (but not when unprovoked), individuals responded...
more aggressively when their self-regulatory resources were depleted (an interaction between instigating and inhibiting factors) (Finkel et al., 2009). Theory focuses on the forces at work in specific interpersonal situations, although it also incorporates distal variables that affect behavior in the situation. Perhaps the most novel aspect of the theory is the inclusion of disinhibiting factors. Although the importance of restraining violent impulses is implicit in anger-management training for PV (Bowen, 2011; Murphy & Eckhardt, 2005), theory and research in the PV field have focused on factors that motivate PV rather than factors that inhibit urges to aggress.

![Dynamic developmental systems model of partner violence](image)


Capaldi, Shortt, and Kim (2005) have proposed a dynamic developmental systems (DDS) model of PV (see Figure 2). This model was based on findings from longitudinal studies indicating the developmental and dyadic origins of risk for PV. Although previous models have included background variables such as exposure to violence during childhood, they have not considered these variables in a broader developmental context. This model takes into consideration risk factors for less than optimal parenting, parenting deficits that may set the stage for children to develop conduct and emotional problems, at-risk individuals’ choice of at-risk relationship partners, and relationship development over time, which potentially changes the risk for PV. Although previous models acknowledge the dyadic context of partner aggression and may include partner and dyadic variables, they have generally maintained a focus on predicting PV at the individual level. The DDS model focuses on the dyad as the key to understanding PV.
The model emphasizes that both members of a couple influence the development of abusive dynamics, that partners affect one another over time, and that PV arises out of reciprocal interaction patterns. Moreover, the bidirectional nature of much PV is explicitly acknowledged. Finally, the model includes the proximal context of violent incidents such as substance use and relationship events that precipitate abusive conflict. Some of the tenets of the DDS model have been examined in the Oregon Youth Study, a longitudinal study of at-risk boys and their partners. For example, antisocial young men are likely to pair with antisocial young women, and female partners’ antisocial behavior and depressive symptoms predict men’s aggressiveness over and above the men’s own risk factors (Kim & Capaldi, 2004). Other longitudinal cohort studies have also confirmed various components of the DDS model (e.g., Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Robins et al., 2002; Woodward et al., 2002).

Finally, we have proposed a dyadic model for integrating theory and research on PV (Bartholomew & Cobb, 2011; see Figure 3). The model incorporates individual background and dispositional characteristics of both partners (P1 and P2), the ways in which the relationship context is established by the interaction between partners’ predispositions, and the situational contexts in which relational patterns give rise to patterns of PV. We expect partners to influence each other at each stage of the model. We also expect that subsequent steps in the model will mediate the effect of earlier factors on the risk of PV. For instance, background and dispositional variables will influence PV primarily through their effect on relationship and situational contexts. Thus, partners whose relationships are characterized by mutual satisfaction, trust, benevolent partner attributions, and constructive communication are not at risk for PV, despite any individual dispositions toward violence. However, we do recognize that individuals who enter into relationships with vulnerabilities and risk factors for PV may find it challenging to establish and maintain a positive relationship. Moreover, PV does not occur randomly even in distressed relationships with entrenched patterns of hostility. PV occurs when the situational and interactional context triggers and fails to inhibit violent impulses by one or both partners.

Finally, relationships are embedded in social and cultural communities that provide an important context for all steps in the process leading to PV. Although not depicted in the figure, we do not conceive of the model of PV as linear and unidirectional. Rather, we expect that later stages may feed back to earlier stages. For instance, involvement in a conflictual and distressing relationship may reinforce dispositional risk factors over time, such as attachment anxiety and depression, contributing to further relationship dysfunction and an escalating cycle of couple conflict and abuse. Though research has not specifically assessed this model of PV, most links in the model have received empirical support (for a review, see Bartholomew & Cobb, 2011).

Each of the models of PV described (and there are others) attempts to organize the large and unwieldy research literature on PV. Although these models differ in focus, they are consistent in their inclusion of the key predictors of PV. The later models build on the earlier models, indicating an encouraging movement in the field toward greater integration of the disparate approaches to thinking about PV. These models all take a dimensional rather than a typological approach, thereby allowing for diverse paths to different patterns of PV and for interactions between PV risk factors (dispositional, relational, and situational) (cf. Capaldi & Kim, 2007; Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004). The I³ model is especially useful for examining the forces at work in a particular situation and how, in interaction, various forces affect the likelihood of violence. Although the focus remains on the individual and on perpetration of PV, the model does accommodate partner and dyadic variables. The dynamic developmental systems (DDS; Capaldi et al., 2005) and dyadic (Bartholomew & Cobb, 2011)
Figure 3. A dyadic model of partner violence. Adapted from “Conceptualizing Relationship Violence as a Dyadic Process,” by K. Bartholomew & R. J. Cobb, 2011, In L. M. Horowitz & S. Strack (Eds.), Handbook of interpersonal psychology: Theory, research, assessment, and therapeutic interventions, p. 234. Copyright 2011 by John Wiley & Sons Inc.
models identify the dyad, rather than the individual, as the appropriate unit of analysis. Both allow for various patterns of PV, including mutual and unidirectional abuse, rather than focusing exclusively on violence perpetration. They differ in that DDS provides a more clearly articulated developmental framework, especially as applied to the developmental context in which individual risk factors or dispositions arise. The dyadic model, in contrast, more clearly indicates the meditational paths linking individual variables to the relationship context to the specific situational context in which violence may arise.

The models presented share some limitations. Given their complexity and breadth, they cannot realistically be evaluated as a whole; rather, at best, particular components of these models can be assessed. All five models presented here acknowledge the importance of the cultural context in which individuals and their relationships are embedded. Nevertheless, perhaps because psychologists rather than sociologists have formulated these models, an analysis of the cultural context is lacking. In spite of these limitations, multi-factor models contribute to our understanding by integrating diverse perspectives on PV and these models have the potential to provide the basis for a number of productive research directions.

The Cultural Context of Partner Violence

The social and cultural communities in which relationships are embedded provide an overarching context for the individual, relational, and situational factors affecting the development of PV. However, the vast majority of cross-cultural research examining PV has been guided by feminist perspectives and, as such, has focused almost exclusively on male violence against women and on attitudinal predictors. Some of this work has considered how patriarchal societal structures may foster violence against women, and how the link between patriarchal structures and violence against women may be mediated by men’s sexist attitudes and tolerance of wife abuse. Consistent with expectations from a feminist analysis of PV, the lower the status of women in a society, the higher the society’s rate of violence against women, in absolute terms and relative to the rate of violence against men. As well, the higher the proportion of men in a society who hold traditional gender-role attitudes and find it acceptable for a husband to slap his wife, the higher the rate of violence against women (Archer, 2006). Further consideration of the cross-cultural data on PV generates a more complex picture. First, women’s parallel attitudes are at least as predictive, and in some cases more predictive, of their victimization as are men’s attitudes, suggesting that women play a role in maintaining traditional gender roles. In some traditional societies (e.g., Jordan and Egypt), the large majority of women believe that wife beating is justified in at least some situations (e.g., Linos, Khawaja, & Al-Nsour, 2010; El-Zanty, Hussein, Shawky, Way & Kishor, 1995). Second, the higher the level of women’s empowerment in a society, the higher the level of their violence towards men; in societies in which women’s social power is approaching that of men’s, rates of women’s PV surpass those of men (Archer, 2006). Third, there is a strong positive association between acceptance of men’s violence towards women and women’s violence toward men (Archer, 2006). Fourth, even in societies with the highest rates of violence against women (such as Papua New Guinea), substantial numbers of women also engage in non-defensive PV and most marriages with violence do not conform to the feminist stereotype of severe, controlling, one-sided male-to-female violence. The traditional feminist analysis cannot account for these findings because it focuses only on men’s aggression toward women. Archer (2006) suggests that social role theory (Eagly, 1987), which considers the social roles of both genders and how
they mutually reinforce one another, is a more appropriate framework for understanding these
cross-cultural patterns.

As convincingly argued by Bond (2004), it is individuals, not cultures, who aggress
against one another. Therefore, it is essential to consider how cultural factors are linked to
individual-level psychological mediators of aggressive behavior. We further suggest the need to
add dyadic and situational mediators. Unfortunately, very little cross-cultural research has
considered psychological, dyadic, or situational correlates of PV. The little research available
suggests that at least some processes appear to operate similarly cross-culturally. Of note, there
is evidence that a childhood history of family violence is associated with perpetration and receipt
of PV cross-culturally (Krahe, Bieneck, & Moller, 2005). As well, PV appears to arise in the
relational context of conflicts of interest between partners in different cultural contexts (e.g., Kim
& Emery, 2003; Winstok & Eisikovits, 2008). However, researchers need to consider the
possibility that the individual, dyadic, and situational processes associated with PV may differ
cross-culturally (Bond, 2004).

Implications for Intervention and Prevention

Intervention programs stemming from the feminist analysis of PV aim to re-educate
violent men by challenging their patriarchal attitudes, including their belief that they have the
right to dominate and control their female partners. In particular, the Duluth model (Pence &
Paymar, 1993) has been used extensively with groups of court-mandated men across the Western
world. Psychosocial understandings of PV are generally rejected because they are seen as
reducing men’s responsibility for their violence and as potentially holding women partially
responsible for their victimization. Despite widespread application, there is little evidence of the
effectiveness of these programs (Babcock et al., 2004; Feder & Wilson, 2005), perhaps because
they generally fail to consider the individual, dyadic, and interactional dimensions of PV (Dutton
& Corvo, 2006, 2007; Graham-Kevan, 2007a). As well, psychoeducational programs train
facilitators to take a punitive, confrontational approach to perpetrators, which may undermine the
development of a positive working alliance with clients (cf. Dutton & Corvo, 2006). Feminist
perspectives have also hindered the development of programs for abused men and for violent
women because of their focus on men’s violence against women.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) programs for male perpetrators, stemming primarily
from individually based, psychological perspectives on PV, fare somewhat better than strictly
psychoeducational programs (Babcock et al., 2004; Dutton, Bodnarchuk, Kropp, Hart, & Ogloff,
1997; Feder & Wilson, 2005; Murphy & Eckhardt, 2005). Moreover, many current programs
based on the Duluth Model now incorporate CBT interventions (Babcock et al., 2004). CBT
addresses cognitive processes associated with PV (e.g., attitudes toward PV, minimization of
abuse) and teaches perpetrators skills such as stress management, assertive communication,
anger management, and recognition of the relational situational triggers of PV. Thus, CBT
addresses, at least in part, the situational contexts in which PV is most likely to arise. However,
this treatment approach is limited by focusing on only one member of dyads with violence, and
by targeting a relatively narrow subset of the factors that contribute to PV.

In recent years, researchers and clinicians have advocated for a broader range of PV
treatments informed by the current research base on PV (Hamel; 2005; Hamel & Nicholls, 2007).
Multi-factor models may prove helpful by providing inclusive and accessible frameworks for
understanding the complex problem of PV, thereby encouraging the development of intervention
programs to target risk factors at different levels of analysis (e.g., individual factors, couple factors, situational factors). For instance, Blended Behavioral Therapy holds promise by expanding the therapeutic targets of CBT to include attachment disorders, borderline personality traits, trauma symptoms, and shame (Dutton, 2008). Emerging from dyadic perspectives on PV, couples therapy also offers promise (O’Leary, 2002; Stith & McCollum, 2011; Stith, Rosen, & McCollum, 2003). Couples therapy, whether as a stand-alone intervention or in conjunction with other interventions such as individual CBT, can help couples deal with relational issues that give rise to conflict and to learn constructive means of dealing with conflicts that inevitably arise in intimate relationships. Stith and colleagues (2003) have also developed multi-couple treatment groups for PV in which couples learn from the experiences of other couples facing similar challenges. As well, there is growing interest in incorporating alcohol treatment in PV treatments (Murphy & Ting, 2010), given that alcohol (and other substance abuse) may undermine the capacity to control violent impulses. For example, Fals-Stewart and colleagues (2002) have developed an effective PV intervention that combines couples therapy and individual substance use treatment for the male perpetrator. Although these various alternative treatments (and there are others beyond those described here) to the established programs for male perpetrators are encouraging, treatment outcome research is lacking. Thus, the efficacy or effectiveness of these alternative treatments has yet to be clearly demonstrated, especially in head-to-head comparisons to establish whether any particular approach or adjunct to PV treatments yields an advantage (Gondolf, 2011).

Although the development of effective services and treatments for individuals and couples struggling with PV is essential, the goal of preventing PV before it occurs is just as important. Feminist perspectives focus on the need to create gender equity and change patriarchal attitudes on a societal level. Although these are laudable goals, the high rates of PV in countries that have made the most progress toward these goals suggest that societal-level changes in social roles are unlikely to eliminate PV. In Western countries, a number of school-based programs for preventing dating violence have been implemented. These programs generally focus on knowledge about PV, often with a component addressing communication and conflict skills. Many of these programs are based on feminist and social learning perspectives, although the theoretical basis of some programs is unclear (Whitaker et al., 2006). Unfortunately, there are few well designed outcome studies of these programs, making it difficult to draw conclusions about their effectiveness. However, a few, such as the Safe Dates program, have shown encouraging results (Foshee et al., 2005; Whitaker et al., 2006).

O’Leary and Slep (2011) argue that effective PV prevention programs must be based on four premises. First, PV is most common among young women and men, which requires intervention before dating begins. Second, the behavior of both partners must be targeted (as asserted by dyadic perspectives). Third, PV is quite stable from adolescence through young adulthood, underscoring the need for early prevention. Fourth, PV may be easier to prevent than to treat, given that entrenched and severe problems are generally harder to treat. We add that prevention programs need to be based on empirically derived understandings of PV. Prevention programs given to all youth in a given setting may be helpful in changing attitudes regarding PV (especially the current acceptance of women’s PV) and may help some youth to avoid becoming involved in abusive dating relationships. However, prospective studies indicate that a minority of adolescents are at high risk for PV based on their family backgrounds, personal vulnerabilities (such as conduct problems), and tendencies toward assortative mating on risk factors. Brief, universal prevention programs that focus on attitudes and, to a lesser extent, communication
skills are unlikely to be sufficient to intervene in a meaningful way with these high-risk youth. Therefore, some researchers have advocated for more intensive programs for this select group of at-risk children and youth (Ehrensaft, 2008; Whitaker et al., 2006). Given that child maltreatment is a risk factor for later problem behaviors and PV, ultimately effective prevention programs will need to target parenting skills and children’s individual risk factors. Such programs can be informed by the literature on preventing youth antisocial behavior (Ehrensaft, 2008; Moffitt, 1993; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001) and programs to promote better family functioning and prevent child maltreatment (MacLeod & Nelson, 2000).

**Future Directions**

Researchers and theoreticians in the field of partner abuse have made remarkable strides in the last couple of decades. The development and application of dyadic and situational perspectives have greatly contributed to our understanding of partner abuse. Researchers have also developed multi-factor models that integrate individual, dyadic, situational, and cultural influences on PV, thereby attempting to grapple with the complexity of the factors that play a role in the development of abuse in intimate relationships. New models of treatment and prevention based on these new, more complex, perspectives are under development. But there is still considerable work to do.

The majority of PV research continues to focus on male perpetration of abuse against female partners—the legacy of the feminist analysis of PV. Increasingly, researchers are including both genders and considering PV in a range of relationship forms, including same-sex relationships. However, further work is required to establish whether and how the predictors of PV differ by gender of perpetrator and victim. Moreover, the majority of published research continues to examine either perpetrators or victims of PV in isolation. As highlighted by the dyadic and situational perspectives, it is essential for researchers to consider both partners in understanding the development of abusive dynamics and to acknowledge the possibility of mutual abuse. In particular, there is a pressing need for the study of dyadic and situational processes in same-sex couples and in couples selected for severe female-to-male violence. These forms of violent relationships not only deserve attention in their own right, but such study may provide insight into the role of gender in PV more generally.

Overwhelmingly, research in the PV field has relied on self-reports of individual characteristics, relational feelings, and perpetration and receipt of abusive acts. This reliance reflects the individual, rather than dyadic, focus of most research, and is influenced by the fact that abuse typically takes place in private settings and therefore is not directly observable. Although self-report measures will always be required to assess individuals’ abuse-related experiences, it is time to broaden methods to better capture the processes leading to partner abuse. Research from dyadic perspectives has demonstrated the value of including reports from both members of couples with violence (e.g., Ehrensaft et al., 2004; Roberts & Noller, 1998) and the value of observing interactional processes in couples with violence (e.g., Cordova et al., 1993). Researchers exploring the situational contexts in which abuse arises have been especially creative in devising new research approaches. For instance, daily diaries can be used to examine situational factors associated with PV in samples with frequent abuse (e.g., Fals-Stewart, 2003). Similar methods could be applied to higher frequency outcomes associated with PV, such as acts of emotional abuse. As well, laboratory analogue studies (e.g., Dutton & Browning, 1988; Finkel et al., 2009) and couple interaction studies (Leonard & Roberts, 1998) are useful for
identifying situational triggers of PV. We especially encourage the further application of experimental social-cognitive methods such as priming (e.g., Dutton, Lane, Koren, & Bartholomew, 2012) and manipulation of self-regulatory resources (e.g., Finkel et al., 2012) to explore the cognitive and emotional processes that facilitate and inhibit acts of partner abuse.

Perhaps the most pressing and greatest challenge in the field of PV is for a more sophisticated analysis of the cultural context of partner abuse. A high priority should be put on research examining how cultural factors are linked to individual, dyadic, and situational mediators of partner abuse. In some cases, cultural factors may influence the mean level of a psychological construct in a population, in turn influencing mean levels of PV. For example, the patriarchal structure of a society is associated with societal endorsement of patriarchal attitudes and with levels of men’s violence against women. However, even in the seemingly straightforward case of patriarchal attitudes, the mechanisms of influence are unclear. Is it the case that patriarchal attitudes actually encourage men’s PV as suggested by the traditional feminist analysis? Or do such attitudes weaken inhibitions against men’s violent impulses (impulses that may result from non-gendered psychological vulnerabilities and relationship frustrations) and foster women’s greater tolerance of men’s violence? What is the role of external societal sanctions, or lack of sanctions, for PV? And how might traditional gender attitudes affect spousal relationships? Perhaps marriages in societies with more traditional attitudes are more conflictual and less satisfying. Or perhaps the lack of availability of divorce in many traditional societies plays an important role: If marital conflict escalates over time with no possibility of ending the marriage, women may come to bear an increasing burden of abuse because of men’s greater physical strength. A similar analysis could be applied to the data indicating that national rates of corporal punishment of children are strongly associated with national rates of dating PV (Douglas & Straus, 2006). This link could be mediated through personality dispositions (such as higher levels of insecure attachment because of coercive parenting) or through individuals failing to learn effective conflict management skills. Or perhaps a general societal acceptance of interpersonal violence fails to inhibit individuals’ violent impulses whether towards children or relationship partners.

The role of culture in understanding PV is further complicated by the possibility that different psychological and interpersonal processes may lead to PV in different cultural contexts (Bond, 2004). Some general processes are likely to be similar cross-culturally. For example, conflicts of interest between partners likely set the dyadic context for PV cross-culturally (e.g., Kim & Emery, 2003; Winstok & Eisikovits, 2008), although the content of conflicts may vary. Some inhibitors (e.g., social sanctions) and disinhibitors (e.g., alcohol) of PV are also likely to operate in similar ways across cultures. Other processes may vary substantially. For instance, assortative mating that matches partners’ dispositions toward violence may be less likely in cultures in which marriages are arranged. As well, attachment-related personal dispositions and dyadic conflicts may be less relevant in societies in which a close attachment relationship between spouses is not expected or encouraged. Unfortunately, there is little research on psychological, dyadic, or situational correlates of PV cross-culturally, and even less that considers both genders together (for a notable exception, see Kim & Emery, 2003). Research incorporating multiple levels of analysis is essential to understand the etiology of PV in other cultural contexts, and such research may provide insight into societal-level predictors in Western society.

In conclusion, PV is common, and even though it is not always severe, it has serious consequences for individuals and their intimate relationships. To develop better interventions to
reduce or eliminate this harmful relationship behavior, models that account for the multifaceted and complex nature of violence in relationships are required. The multi-factor models presented here highlight the need to consider not only the psychological factors that put some individuals at risk for PV, but also the dyadic factors that put some relationships at risk, the situational factors that precipitate violence in at risk relationships, and lastly, the broader socio-cultural context within which all relationships are embedded.

References


VIOLENCE IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS
