CONCEPTUALIZING RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE AS A DYADIC PROCESS

Kim Bartholomew
Rebecca J. Cobb

All couples face situations in which partners have conflicting personal or relational goals. The strong interdependence between intimate partners creates ample opportunities for such conflict, conflict that sometimes results in violence. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is disturbingly common in marital relationships (e.g., 16% prevalence in the past year; Straus & Gelles, 1986) and even more common in dating and same-sex relationships (e.g., Straus, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2005). Contrary to the stereotype that IPV consists of men agressing against female partners, men and women report similar rates of IPV (Archer, 2000). We present a framework for organizing the IPV research literature based on the premise that relationships are inherently interactional. Relationships reside in the interplay of both partners’ dispositions and how this interplay unfolds over time in a range of contexts. Therefore, any relationship behavior, including IPV, can only be fully understood in the context of the couple system (cf. Reiss, Capobianco, & Tsai, 2002).

Feminist perspectives on IPV have traditionally asked “Why do men beat their wives?” (Bograd, 1988), and answered that men control their wives through violence as part of a patriarchal system of male privilege and female subordination. Thus, IPV is defined as primarily a sociological problem, rather than a psychological or relationship problem. Feminist perspectives have been instrumental in galvanizing societal attention and action on violence against women. However, there are major problems with the patriarchal perspective on IPV: some of its core tenets are contradicted by empirical research, it fails to address the full range of partner abuse (including IPV by women and same-sex partners), and interventions based on this perspective are generally ineffective (Babcock, Canady, Graham, & Schart, 2007; Dutton & Corvo, 2006; Dutton & Nicholls, 2005). As well, work from this perspective has been conducted with little reference to literature on intimate relationships or to the broader literatures on aggression and interpersonal processes.

Although feminist perspectives continue to guide public policy and popular discourse on IPV, the research and clinical communities are moving toward more complex, empirically based understandings of

Acknowledgments: We thank Don Dutton, Erika Lawrence, and the editors for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.
IPV (Hamel & Nicholls, 2007). Psychological perspectives on IPV ask “Why do some individuals abuse their intimate partners?” (e.g., Dutton, 2007; Ehrensaft, 2008). These perspectives have been fruitful in explaining the developmental trajectories and psychological makeup of perpetrators of IPV, but are limited by a failure to consider the dyadic context of IPV (cf. Bartholomew & Allison, 2006). Interactional perspectives—a more recent development—ask “What are the relational and situational contexts in which IPV occurs?” (e.g., Winstok, 2007). These approaches have greatly expanded our understanding of IPV, but they have not generally incorporated personality and background factors of relationship partners.

In Figure 14.1, we present a model for organizing the IPV literature. The model addresses individual background and dispositional characteristics of partners (P1 and P2), how partners’ predispositions interact to establish their relationship context, and the situational contexts in which relational patterns give rise to violent interactions (cf. Capaldi & Kim, 2007). At each stage of the model, partners may reciprocally influence one another, and (though not depicted in Figure 14.1) later stages may feedback to earlier stages. Generally, we expect factors earlier in the model to impact IPV to the extent that they are mediated by subsequent steps. Thus, regardless of individual dispositions toward violence, partners in mutually satisfying relationships characterized by trust, benevolent partner attributions, and constructive communication would not be at risk for IPV. (Unfortunately, vulnerable individuals may find it challenging to establish and maintain such a positive relationship!) Moreover, even in distressed relationships with entrenched patterns of hostility, IPV does not occur randomly. It occurs when the situational and interactional context triggers and sustains violent impulses by one or both partners.

We selectively review research relevant to each step of the model, with particular focus on the situational context because

![Diagram of a Dyadic Model of Partner Violence]

**FIGURE 14.1** A Dyadic Model of Partner Violence
it has received the least attention. There are some limitations to the framework in Figure 14.1. First, the model does not explicitly incorporate the broader social and cultural systems in which individual, relational, and situational contexts are embedded. Second, reflecting the empirical literature, we focus on the perpetration of IPV. However, given the high level of reciprocal abuse in intimate relationships, predictors of IPV receipt are generally similar (e.g., Magdol et al., 1997). Also reflecting the empirical literature, we focus on physical rather than psychological abuse. However, psychological abuse (including verbal aggression and controlling behavior) predicts the onset of IPV, coexists with IPV, and can have just as deleterious effects as IPV on individuals and relationships (O'Leary, 1999). We expect the proposed model to apply to psychological abuse, with one caveat: for women, IPV appears to exist on a continuum with psychological abuse, but for men IPV may represent a qualitative increase in abusiveness, given the strong normative prohibitions against men assaulting women (cf. Stets, 1990). Finally, although research has focused on risk factors for male-to-female IPV, similar patterns of findings generally hold across gender and across relationship type (gay, heterosexual; dating, marital, and cohabiting) (e.g., Medeiros & Straus, 2006, 2007; Bartholomew, Regan, Oram, & Landolt, 2008). Therefore, we address gender only when there are theoretical or empirical reasons to expect that gender moderates associations with IPV.

BACKGROUND AND DISPOSITIONAL FACTORS

A large body of psychological research addresses the question of why some people in a given culture perpetrate violence against intimate partners and others do not (the link between Background/Dispositions and IPV in Figure 14.1). The rationale guiding much of this work is that childhood experiences in the family impact emotional and social functioning, putting individuals at greater or lesser risk for future IPV. For example, social learning perspectives suggest that exposure to family violence teaches children that aggression is a viable means of dealing with interpersonal conflict, which increases the likelihood of future IPV in conflict situations (Dutton, 2006). Alternatively, attachment perspectives suggest that inadequate parenting leads to anxious attachment orientations in children, leading to hypersensitivity to abandonment in intimate relationships, and to a risk of aggression against partners as a form of protest behavior to maintain contact with an intimate partner (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006).

Consistent with developmental models of IPV, retrospective reports of adverse experiences in the family of origin (including witnessing interparental violence, maltreatment, parental rejection, and negative family environment) predict IPV in adult relationships (Dutton, 2006). IPV is also concurrently associated with a host of personal and interpersonal qualities: personal vulnerability (notably attachment insecurity, dependency, and low self-esteem); aggressive, angry, and antisocial tendencies (including childhood conduct problems); psychopathology (notably borderline personality, depression, and trauma symptoms); dysfunctional interpersonal patterns (e.g., hostile/dominance, poor social skills, hostile attribution bias); and attitudes toward the acceptability of IPV (Dutton, 2006).

Most research linking individual factors with IPV is cross-sectional, raising the possibility that experiences of IPV influence retrospective childhood reports and even enduring dispositions. For example, the link between anxious attachment and IPV could indicate that abusive relationships undermine attachment security. Similarly, the link between attitudes toward IPV and perpetration of IPV (found consistently only for men) could indicate a post hoc justification for IPV. In the last decade, prospective studies have examined how
childhood family and personal factors relate to subsequent IPV. Across studies, the strongest and most consistent predictors of IPV are child and adolescent conduct problems (e.g., Ehrensaft, Moffit, & Caspi, 2004; Woodward, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2002), negative emotionality (indicating vulnerability, reactivity, and proneness to anger) (e.g., Moffitt, Krueger, Caspi, & Fagan, 2000), and adolescent depression (e.g., Ehrensaft, Moffit, & Caspi, 2006). These studies confirm cross-sectional associations between adverse childhood experiences and adult IPV (e.g., Ehrensaft et al., 2003) and confirm that this link is mediated, at least in part, by adolescent behavioral and emotional problems (Ehrensaft, 2008). Though not consistent across studies, there is some indication of more severe pathology and deviance in adolescent boys who go on to perpetrate IPV than in girls who go on to perpetrate IPV (e.g., Ehrensaft et al., 2004; Magdol et al., 1997).

Because individual risk factors are assessed before entry into romantic relationships, prospective studies provide an opportunity to consider both partners’ contributions to the development of IPV. In a New Zealand birth cohort, negative emotionality (assessed at 18 years of age) predicted abuse perpetration by both partners in established heterosexual relationships three years later (Moffitt, Robins, & Caspi, 2001). Moreover, each partner’s negative emotionality was as strong a predictor of their partner’s abuse as of their own abuse (cross-partner effects). Another analysis from the same cohort indicated that the most severely violent relationships at ages 24 to 26 were comprised of two partners characterized by adolescent risk factors (Ehrensaft et al., 2004). Similarly, in a longitudinal study of at-risk youth, women’s antisocial behavior and depression predicted their male partners’ later aggression (Kim & Capaldi, 2004).

Longitudinal studies also indicate a moderate degree of assortative mating on antisocial behavior (Kim & Capaldi, 2004; Krueger, Moffitt, Caspi, Bleske, & Silva, 1998). Thus, young people tend to select mates who share risk factors for future IPV, and then they mutually influence each other’s tendencies to engage in partner abuse. These effects are consistent with conceptualizing IPV as arising in a relational context and highlight the inadequacy of focusing on only one member of the dyad to understand a dyadic phenomenon.

**RELATIONSHIP CONTEXT**

Dyadic relationships emerge from the interaction of the enduring characteristics of two partners in specific contexts. There is considerable indirect evidence that IPV is a dyadic phenomenon. For instance, both partners’ background characteristics predict IPV perpetration and victimization, and there is strong mutuality of abuse in intimate relationships (Bartholomew & Allison, 2006). Individuals’ IPV is more stable within relationships than across relationships in young adulthood, indicating that dyadic factors impact IPV (Capaldi, Shortt, & Crosby, 2003; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2002). However, studies linking both partners’ characteristics to IPV do not directly address the relationship context in which IPV arises.

Violence by one or both partners is robustly associated with relationship dissatisfaction (e.g., Williams & Frieze, 2005). Thus, it is not surprising that the relational predictors of IPV parallel the predictors of global relationship dissatisfaction. Various individual-level variables indicative of insecurity and distrust in a relationship are associated with IPV. Notably, individuals who aggress against partners tend to make negative attributions for their partners’ behavior, and tend to view their partners as critical, rejecting, intentionally hurtful, and malicious (e.g., Scott & Straus, 2007). Other established correlates of IPV include marital discord (Coleman & Straus, 1990), skills deficits in dealing with marital problems (e.g., Anglin & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1997), and a lack of egalitarian decision making (in favor of either spouse), which
likely contributes to marital conflict (e.g., Coleman & Straus, 1990).

Not only are various relational variables predictive of IPV, but the relationship context moderates the impact of individual risk factors for perpetrating IPV. For example, husband hostility and alcohol abuse predict partner abuse only among men who are maritaly distressed (Leonard & Senchak, 1993). Moreover, partners' personal qualities likely predict IPV to the extent that they impact experiences in their relationships. In the few studies that include background/dispositional and relational predictors of IPV, relational variables, such as marital satisfaction and attributions for partner behavior, are stronger correlates of partner aggression than background predictors and largely mediate associations between background factors and aggression (e.g., O'Leary, Smith Slep, & O'Leary, 2007).

Predispositions of both partners likely interact in predicting IPV. For example, Roberts and Noiler (1998) found that couples comprised of one partner high in attachment anxiety and one partner high in avoidance of intimacy had elevated risk for IPV. They speculate that incompatibilities in desired levels of closeness lead the more anxious partners to use violence in an attempt to gain their partners' attention. Such aggressive demands lead avoidant partners to withdraw further, exacerbating anxious partners' fear of abandonment. Thus, both partners play a role in establishing relational patterns, and partners mutually impact one another over time.

The most direct approach to assessing the relational context of partner abuse may be to examine conflict behavior of couples with IPV. With few exceptions, behavioral studies have focused on male violence in marital and cohabiting relationships. Virtually no work considers IPV in same-sex relationships, in dating relationships, or in relationships characterized by women's abuse of men (for a notable exception, see Capaldi & Crosby, 1997). However, in couples selected for husband violence, wives also report perpetrating high levels of IPV (e.g., Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, Rushe, & Cox, 1993).

Thus, this literature also sheds light on the context in which mutual violence arises.

In observational studies, both partners in couples with a violent husband show high levels of aversive behavior and affect, and high reciprocity of negativity in problem-solving discussions (Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Bates, 1997). Partners tend to respond to each other's negativity (e.g., hostile anger and expressions of criticism, contempt, and belligerence) with negativity, resulting in escalation. In contrast, satisfied couples do not tend to reciprocate aversive partner behavior with further negativity, thereby containing the conflict and avoiding escalation (e.g., Cordova et al., 1993). The importance of negative reciprocity in setting the context for IPV is also indicated by cross-dyad influences on partner aggression in short-term longitudinal studies of couples; over time, aggression by one partner tends to elicit aggression by the other (e.g., O'Leary & Smith Slep, 2003; Schumacher & Leonard, 2005).

Of interest, there is some evidence that in dissatisfied but nonviolent couples, wives tend to show higher negativity and verbal aggressiveness than husbands, while husbands tend to show higher withdrawal and defensiveness (e.g., Jacobson et al., 1994; Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993). This pattern suggests that as long as only one person acts overtly aggressive (most often the wife), and the partner does not reciprocate, the conflict is unlikely to escalate to severe violence (at least by the husband) (cf. Leonard & Senchak, 1996). Consistent with this interpretation, young heterosexual couples with low, nonclinical levels of partner abuse were characterized by higher IPV by female partners, whereas severely abusive relationships were characterized by high IPV by both partners (Ehrensaft et al., 2004).

SITUATIONAL CONTEXT

Given partners' personal risk factors for IPV and their mutually constructed relationship, what are the situational factors that
affect the occurrence of IPV? This question has received little systematic attention (for exceptions, see Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005; Winstok, 2007). We do know that arguments typically precede IPV (Cascardi & Vivian, 1995; R. E. Dobash & Dobash, 1984), suggesting that IPV occurs during attempts to resolve conflicts of interest. Anger, and potentially IPV, arise when one or both partners are frustrated in meeting their goals, whether the goal is to gain a partner’s attention, to have time alone to pursue personal interests, or to have the partner fulfill a household duty. Situational perspectives on IPV examine the interpersonal contexts in which IPV is likely, and the interactional processes leading to IPV. We expect relationship factors to affect the occurrence and nature of conflict situations. For instance, distressed, insecure partners are more likely to experience situations in which they perceive relationship threat. Further, couples with established patterns of negative communication will find it especially difficult to deal constructively with conflicts that arise.

Interpersonal situations may interact with dispositions toward aggression in predicting aggressive outcomes. In a meta-analysis of personality and aggressive behavior, traits indicating vulnerability to provocation (e.g., emotional sensitivity and impulsivity) were only related to aggression under provoking conditions (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006). In a review of the literature linking interpersonal rejection with aggression, Leary, Twenge, and Quinlivan (2006) suggested that individuals who are sensitive to rejection (such as those high in attachment anxiety) are most prone to aggression when faced with rejection. Dutton and Browning (1988) found that violent husbands responded with greater anger and anxiety to videotaped couple arguments related to wife abandonment than did control husbands. Specifically, violent husbands reported more anger in response to a conflict about a wife’s demands for independence (such as wanting to spend more time with friends), but did not react more negatively than other husbands to a conflict about a wife’s demands for intimacy (a desire for her husband to open up more) or to a neutral conflict (a disagreement over vacation plans). Person-situation interaction is also evident in the finding that violent husbands can be distinguished from nonviolent husbands by their inability to provide competent responses to scenarios involving wife rejection (Holtzworth-Munroe & Anglin, 1991).

The importance of attachment-related threats (such as abandonment and rejection) in setting the stage for IPV is also evident in qualitative studies of participants’ descriptions of IPV. In a study of heterosexual couples identified for male IPV, Allison, Bartholomew, Mayselss, and Dutton (2008) found that male and female violence could often be understood as part of a coherent strategy to regulate closeness and distance. When other strategies failed, individuals sometimes resorted to violence to pursue or to hold on to a partner they perceived to be withdrawing or, conversely, to force distance from a partner making excessive demands for closeness (cf. Roberts & Noller, 1998). Although these strategies were related to dispositional attachment insecurities, the dynamics of these relationships could only be understood by examining the interplay of both partners’ attachment orientations and current attachment-related goals. Similarly, in a study of gay men describing violent incidents in same-sex relationships, Stanley, Bartholomew, Taylor, Oram, and Landolt (2006) observed that most violent conflicts involved attachment-relevant threats (such as partner rejection or infidelity) or incompatible needs for closeness versus autonomy. Also, jealousy is one of the most commonly reported precipitants of male IPV against women (for a review, see Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005).

Though the motivational context for IPV can be inferred from conflict descriptions, it may not be feasible to identify motives for specific acts of IPV. Self-reported motives for IPV are subject to reconstruction and may be more accurately thought of as attributions or post hoc justifications for IPV. It is also problematic to assess motives for IPV
as though they reside in individuals and are independent of the shifting relational and situational context. Moreover, as conflict escalates, the conflict process can become a source of anxiety and threat, and couples often shift their attention from the original source of conflict to the course of the conflict itself (Winstok & Eisikovits, 2008). Partners may then strike out violently to retaliate against partner abuse (e.g., "He insulted me, so I slapped him"), to escape conflict when faced with a partner who physically blocks exit, or to force engagement with a fleeing partner (Allison et al., 2008). There may also be multiple motives at play in a given situation. For example, an attempt to control a partner’s Internet use may also reflect a desire to spend more time with a partner seen as lacking in interest. There is even evidence that motivational conflict—when partners differ in their perceptions of each other’s motives in a conflict situation—is associated with elevated verbal aggression (Winstok, 2006b). Hostile attributions for partner behavior likely contribute to misunderstandings of each other’s interpersonal goals, further fuelling frustration and anger.

Given the complexities of identifying motives for IPV, it may not be worthwhile to assess specific motives. Rather, aggressive conflict tactics can be seen as attempts to influence or control the partner when more conventional means of influence (e.g., requests, discussion, and compromise) have failed (Archer & Coyne, 2005). More generally, anger and aggression stem from frustration in meeting interpersonal goals (Berkowitz, 1993), and goals related to acceptance, closeness, and autonomy tend to be especially salient in intimate relationships.

The few studies to examine individuals’ accounts of the interaction processes leading to IPV suggest that violence typically follows an escalating pattern of negativity by both partners. Consistent with the couple interaction research previously reviewed, Burman, Margolin, and John (1993) found, based on home reenactment of conflicts, that aggressive couples displayed high levels of hostile affect and engaged in reciprocal patterns of hostility. Perpetrators overwhelmingly self-report that their aggressive acts are precipitated by their partners’ verbal or physical abuse or by some other negative partner behavior (O’Leary & Smith Slep, 2006). Even in couples selected for severe male violence against female partners, violence is preceded by mutual escalation and each partner views their actions as reactions to their partners’ actions (Winstok & Eisikovits, 2008). A priority for future research is to employ daily-diary methods to test whether patterns in retrospective reports of violent episodes are replicated when partners report closer in time to their conflicts. Another priority is to explore the role of hostile attributions for partner behavior in escalating conflict leading to violence (Eckhardt & Dye, 2000).

During couple conflict, individuals experience violent impulses toward intimate partners much more frequently than they act upon them (Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009). Finkel (2007) argues that theory and research on factors that impel individuals to perpetuate IPV need to be complemented with attention to factors that inhibit aggressive impulses. Notably, internalized norms about the unacceptability of IPV and related expectations about the negative consequences of IPV for the self, the partner, and the relationship may serve to inhibit IPV in conflict situations. We are not aware of research examining the direct role of IPV norms and outcome expectancies in inhibiting impulses toward IPV. However, the literature on IPV norms indicates that men have much stronger attitudes prohibiting male IPV and much more negative outcome expectations for IPV (especially social sanctions) than women have about female IPV (e.g., Miller & Simpson, 1991; Sorenson & Taylor, 2005). In contrast, women might be more likely than men to inhibit IPV out of fear of retaliatory violence by a stronger partner. We speculate that whereas the factors predictive of IPV are generally similar across gender, the
inhibiting factors in conflict situations may be more strongly gendered.

Finkel and colleagues (2009) demonstrate that self-regulatory failure may undermine the capacity of individuals to control violent impulses toward intimate partners. Self-regulation is affected by various dispositional, relational, and situational factors. Of note, the strong negative emotions elicited in couple conflict can undermine self-control (Winstok & Eissikovits, 2008). Alcohol consumption may also compromise the capacity of individuals to control violent impulses. In a diary study of men in IPV treatment, drinking was strongly associated with the likelihood of IPV on a given day (Fals-Stewart, 2003). In a laboratory study of marital conflict, both partners in couples in which men received alcohol (relative to a placebo) showed increased verbal negativity (Leonard & Roberts, 1998). This finding demonstrates the power of the dyadic system; a change in one partner (the husband’s level of intoxication) was immediately reflected in increased negativity by the other partner. Other laboratory research suggests that alcohol may exacerbate conflict by increasing relational insecurity and hostile partner attributions in men with low-estee (MacDonald, Zanna, & Holmes, 2000). Thus, disinhibiting situational factors interact with individual and relational factors to affect the likelihood of IPV.

PATTERNS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Partner violence varies dramatically in form and severity from occasional pushing to serious acts of violence such as beating up a partner. Although there are extensive data on rates and severity of IPV in various populations, little information is available on the topography of IPV in specific incidents. We briefly review the literature on reciprocity of IPV, initiation of IPV, responses to IPV, and consequences of IPV. Unfortunately, current research does not provide a basis for linking dispositional, relational, and situational factors with specific patterns of IPV.

At least half of violent relationships are characterized by bidirectional or mutual violence (e.g., Anderson, 2002; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). IPV severity is strongly positively associated across partners in heterosexual and same-sex relationships (e.g., Bartholomew, Regan, Landolt, & Oram, 2008; Fergusson, Horwood, & Riddler, 2005), and IPV is more severe and harmful when both partners are violent than when one partner is violent (e.g., Anderson, 2002; Whitaker et al., 2007). From summary IPV measures, we cannot conclude that partners are mutually violent in the same incidents. Even if partners report comparable IPV levels, it could be that only one partner is violent or one partner is more severely violent than the other in a given incident. However, mutuality is suggested by some qualitative data and by the interactional context of reciprocal hostility in violent incidents. Contrary to traditional views that violent relationships consist of a violent (often male) abuser and a helpless (often female) victim, IPV arises in the context of reciprocal interaction and often involves mutual abuse.

Women are more likely than men: (a) to initiate IPV in heterosexual relationships (e.g., Archer, 2000; Fergusson et al., 2005), (b) to report that they would be violent in response to unacceptable partner behavior (e.g., Winstok, 2006a), and (c) to perpetrate IPV when only one partner is violent (e.g., Whitaker et al., 2007). However, we cannot conclude from such findings that women are more likely to be aggressors and men to be victims in one-sided patterns of abuse. Further, the concept of initiation makes little sense from an interactional perspective. Each partner responds to the behavior of the other, and even if one partner is first to bring up an issue or to act out physically during a heated conflict, both partners' reciprocal interaction sets the stage for IPV by either partner. We expect that women are less inhibited in escalating conflict with violence because of weaker norms against female relative to male IPV.
The scanty research on individuals’ responses to IPV focuses on accounts of women identified as victims of severe male violence. Contrary to the stereotype that battered women passively comply with violent partners, female partners of men in batterer programs reported that they complied with their partner’s wishes in less than 5% of violent episodes (Gondolf & Berman, 2003). In another sample of women selected for high levels of victimization, 86% reported that they refused to do what their partner asked of them and 82% reported fighting back physically (Goodman, Dutton, Weinfurt & Cook, 2003). These findings are consistent with what is known about the situational context of IPV; IPV arises in a context of mutual conflict, with both partners struggling to fulfill interpersonal goals. The few larger studies comparing women’s and men’s responses to IPV indicate that women are much more likely to seek formal and informal help and to end relationships (e.g., Povey, Coleman, Kaisa, Hoare, & Janson, 2008). This gender difference could stem from any number of sources, such as greater shame associated with male victimization, the lack of services available to aid male victims, or men finding their victimization less distressing than women.

IPV is associated with a range of adverse health outcomes for both genders. However, the majority of studies indicate that female recipients of male IPV are more likely than male recipients of female IPV to sustain severe injury (at a rate of about 2:1; Archer, 2000), to fear physical harm (e.g., Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), and to report mental health symptoms (e.g., Anderson, 2002). These outcomes could reflect men’s greater intent to harm, women’s greater vulnerability to harm, and/or men’s greater strength and competence with physical aggression. Unfortunately, no research of which we are aware systematically examines reasons for gender differences in IPV outcomes. Based on the dispositional predictors of IPV for both genders, and the relational and situational contexts of IPV, we suspect that the greater harm to women from IPV stems primarily from the greater capacity of men to physically harm their female partners.

PROCESS AND CONTEXTUAL ISSUES

The processes leading to IPV are dynamic—they shift over time in individuals, in relationships, and in situations—and later stages in the process leading to IPV can feed back to earlier stages. In particular, the experience of IPV may undermine partners’ relational trust and security, contributing to marital discord and dissatisfaction (e.g., Lawrence & Bradbury, 2007). Relational experiences can also affect personal dispositions, exacerbating or moderating individual risk factors for IPV, such as impulsivity and negative emotionality (Robins et al., 2002).

Some risk factors for IPV cannot readily be categorized as dispositional, relational, or situational. For example, attitudes about the acceptability of IPV operate on a number of levels. IPV attitudes may derive from cultural norms, individual experiences in childhood and prior intimate relationships (background factors), and from experiences in current relationships. Given that no populations studied ascribe to norms promoting IPV, we hypothesize that attitudes affect IPV primarily through inhibiting IPV in violence-conducive situations (cf. Finkel, 2007). Thus, IPV attitudes may affect responses in violence-eliciting situations without being mediated by the relational context. Similarly, outcome expectancies for violence likely derive from cultural, background, and relational contexts, but they operate on the likelihood of violence in specific conflict situations. Expectancies may shift in a given situation; for instance, if a stronger partner threatens to retaliate physically or if a partner threatens to call the police if assaulted, then IPV expectancies will become more negative.

Cultural and Social Contexts

Although we expect the proposed model to apply cross-culturally, the social and
cultural communities in which relationships are embedded provide an overarching context for all steps in the process leading to IPV. To date, few studies have examined the background, relational, or situational contexts of IPV cross-culturally, making it difficult to interpret cultural differences in IPV rates. For instance, national rates of corporal punishment of children are strongly associated with national IPV attitudes and rates of dating IPV (Douglas & Straus, 2006). These national differences in IPV could be mediated through personality dispositions and/or the quality of intimate relationships. Alternatively, cross-cultural norms for interpersonal violence may directly affect the degree to which individuals inhibit their IPV.

Cultural differences in gender roles and marital processes (how partners are selected, expectations about marriage, availability of divorce, etc.) also likely impact the relational context in which IPV develops. For instance, there may be less evidence of assortative mating on dispositions conducive to violence when marriages are arranged. We would expect conflicts of interest and frustration of interpersonal goals to set the context for IPV cross-culturally (e.g., Kim & Emery, 2003; Winstok & Elisikovits, 2008), though the particular content of conflicts and goals and the form of abuse may be moderated by culture. Whereas patterns of IPV in dating relationships appear to be similar cross-culturally (e.g., comparable rates of male and female IPV; Straus, 2004), patterns of marital IPV differ, with higher rates of male to female IPV in countries with greater gender inequality (Archer, 2006). It is therefore important to examine how culture provides a broader context for the development of IPV.

What About Power and Control?

Feminist perspectives view men’s IPV as part of a general strategy to maintain men’s control over women, and IPV is associated with acting in a controlling way toward a partner (Graham-Kevan, 2007b). However, there is little evidence that even severe IPV typically reflects a general pattern of one partner controlling the other across relational domains (cf. Felson & Outlaw, 2007). Rather, IPV perpetration may be associated with having less power across domains than one’s partner (at least for men) (e.g., Babcock et al., 1993), as might be expected if IPV stems from a failure to meet interpersonal goals. Moreover, there is a strong positive association between the degree to which partners attempt to control one another (O’Leary & Smith Stepp, 2003; Winstok, 2006b), suggesting a dyadic struggle for influence rather than the unilateral control of one partner by the other.

Escalating hostility and IPV are most likely when both partners actively seek to fulfill conflicting goals and resort to coercion when other means have failed. In relationships where a general pattern of dominance does exist, where one partner consistently accedes to the preferences and demands of the other, the conditions for escalating conflict and IPV as a coercive tactic are absent. Presumably, dominant partners are able to meet their goals, and dominated partners, though likely dissatisfied, are putting their desire for relational harmony (or avoidance of conflict) above other personal goals. This analysis is consistent with various findings we have reviewed, notably, that severe IPV is most likely when IPV is mutual, that both partners’ negative reciprocity predicts IPV, and that victims of severe IPV rarely accede to their partners’ demands.

What About Typologies of Partner Violence?

Researchers have proposed various typologies to describe the heterogeneity in violent individuals and violent relationships (Graham-Kevan, 2007a). For example, Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) identified Borderline and Antisocial subtypes of severely violent men. In our proposed model, borderline/emotionally reactive and antisocial/aggressive features may predict somewhat different relational and
situational contexts for IPV and different IPV patterns. We might, for instance, expect perceptions of situational threats to the relationship to be especially provocative for persons with borderline features. Moreover, dispositional factors may interact in predicting IPV outcomes, with individuals high in borderline and antisocial features being at elevated risk for severe IPV across a range of contexts. Thus, dimensional models are well suited for capturing variability in IPV predictors. They allow for the possibility of various paths to varying patterns of IPV, and interactions between IPV risk factors (dispositional, relational, and situational) (cf. Capaldi & Kim, 2007; Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004).

Recently, some researchers have made a categorical distinction between situational and characterological IPV (e.g., Babcock et al., 2007). Situational IPV is described as less severe, likely to be reciprocal, and determined by relational and situational factors. Characterological IPV is severe, asymmetrical (with clear perpetrator and victim roles), and “internally generated” or primarily due to stable dispositional features of the perpetrator. This distinction serves a political purpose of affirming that victims of severe IPV do not bear responsibility for their victimization, but it is inconsistent with evidence of negative reciprocity and mutual IPV in the relationships of highly violent men. Further, severity and mutuality of IPV lie on continuums (Hamel, 2005) that tend to be positively associated (i.e., severe IPV is most common in relationships with mutual IPV); they are not mutually exclusive as proposed subtypes would suggest. More fundamentally, characterological notions of IPV fail to recognize that IPV is inherently interpersonal and situational. Individuals with strong vulnerabilities toward violence may have a stronger impact on the quality of their intimate relationships than do their partners; they may be hypersensitive to indications of their partner’s rejection or hostility; and they may have weaker inhibitions against the use of violence in conflict situations. However, violence-prone individuals are not consistently violent across relationships or across situations. IPV is perpetrated in a dyadic context in specific situations in response to perceived partner behaviors.¹

Future Directions

In the past couple of decades, models of the etiology of IPV have shifted from single-variable models (such as a focus on societal norms or individual pathology) to multi-factor models that incorporate cultural, social, and individual predictors of IPV. More recently, researchers have begun to move beyond individually focused perspectives to incorporate the dyadic context in which IPV takes place. However, the majority of IPV research still examines either perpetrators or victims of IPV in isolation. Just as marital researchers routinely study both partners in a marriage to understand marital processes and outcomes, violence researchers need to routinely include both partners to understand IPV. A dyadic approach will require researchers to consider interactions between predispositions of both partners in a violent relationship in the development of abusive dynamics, and to acknowledge the possibility of mutual abuse. We especially encourage study of the situational context in which episodes of IPV take place, including a focus on factors that inhibit and disinhibit aggression toward an intimate partner. Across domains of inquiry, we encourage a move beyond a focus on married couples and samples chosen for male-to-female IPV, to include the study of IPV in dating couples, in same-sex couples, and in couples distinguished by female-to-male violence.

A range of methods are available to tackle the difficult task of understanding the situational context of IPV, including lab-based studies of couple interactions, and qualitative and daily-diary studies of couples’ descriptions of their abuse-related experiences. The study of IPV has greatly benefited by the perspectives and methods
brought to bear by other fields of study, notably developmental psychopathology (e.g., Ehrensaft et al., 2003), couple and family research (e.g., Jacobson et al., 1994), and adult attachment (e.g., Dutton, Saunders, Starzomski, & Bartholomew, 1994). More progress could be made by incorporating insights from the broader literatures on interpersonal aggression and on interpersonal processes. For instance, greater understanding of the process whereby couples' conflicts escalate to the point of violence may be gained from examining the interpersonal motives of each partner and how each partner's failure to respond with a complementary response to a partner's expressed desire for a particular outcome can lead to mutual frustration and anger (Horowitz et al., 2006).

Clinical Implications

Psychoeducational interventions for violent men, the dominant treatment approach, have limited effectiveness (e.g., Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004). This is not surprising given that they are based on outdated models of IPV that do not address the relational or situational contexts of IPV. In recent years, researchers and clinicians have advocated for a broader range of treatments informed by current IPV research (Hamel & Nicholls, 2007). In particular, couples treatments may be appropriate when the risk of injury from IPV is low. It also may be fruitful to focus treatment on proximal predictors of IPV, such as situational triggers and self-regulatory capacity to control violence, rather than targeting dispositional variables (e.g., Finkel, 2007).

Domestic violence advocates have expressed concern that dyadic models shift attention from the perpetrator as an independent agent to the dyadic context and thereby raise the possibility that identified victims may be partially responsible for their own victimization (e.g., Yllo & Bograd, 1988). We do not suggest that perpetrators are not responsible for their abusive behavior. To the contrary, all perpetrators of IPV should be held personally responsible, regardless of gender. Developing a deeper and more accurate understanding of developmental, relational, and situation contexts of IPV can only further the goal of helping couples to establish satisfying, nonabusive relationships.

SUMMARY

Partners in close relationships inevitably encounter situations in which they perceive their interpersonal goals and aspirations to be incompatible, and a disturbing number of partners resort to violence when confronted by these challenges. We have presented a dyadic framework integrating theory and research on IPV. We have considered the enduring characteristics of both partners (background/dispositional factors), how partners come together and interact to create an intimate relationship (the relationship context), and how IPV can arise when partners respond to and interact in particular situations (the situational context). Difficult childhood experiences are associated with dispositions conducive to violence, especially emotional reactivity and aggressive interpersonal tendencies. These vulnerabilities put people at risk for future intimate relationships characterized by mutual distrust in which partners become locked in patterns of reciprocal hostility when dealing with conflicts of interest. However, partners in such relationships only become violent in specific situations. IPV typically arises during conflicts characterized by escalating hostility, with each partner reacting to perceived provocation from their partner. IPV may be especially likely in situations involving attachment threats if vulnerable individuals respond with extreme anger to perceived abandonment or rejection by their partner. We also considered factors that may inhibit and disinhibit the expression of IPV in provoking situations. We hope that a more inclusive dyadic framework for understanding IPV will help in the development of more effective approaches to prevention and treatment.
References


NOTES

1. Johnson's (1995) influential distinction between IPV as part of a general pattern of domination stemming from stable intrapersonal characteristics of the perpetrator (referred to as patriarchal or intimate terrorism) and mutual lower-level IPV stemming from dyadic and situational factors (referred to as common couple violence) suffers from the same limitations.