

# Is there gender symmetry in intimate partner violence?

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**ABSTRACT**

**'Gender symmetry' is one of the most topical and controversial debates in the contemporary domestic violence literature. National survey data, particularly from the USA, has been utilized to support the concept of gender symmetry of violence between intimate partners. Both these statistics and the reliability of the methodologies used to obtain this data have been the focus of fierce criticism in the domestic violence literature. These debates have spread into the general media and now influence social workers' and students' understanding of violence between intimate partners. Recent work, however, has suggested helpful typologies for a better understanding of intimate partner violence (IPV), and research has explored their validity. A comprehensive understanding of the implications of these debates is important for safe social work interventions as assessments and interventions must be based on an accurate understanding of the aetiology, dynamics and consequences of violence between intimate partners. It is important that practitioners are aware of the background to and complexity of these debates and the ongoing work on typologies of violence, as such understanding will enhance assessments and thereby ensure more appropriate social work interventions. This paper traces the debates and outlines the new developments, which can enhance assessments and understanding of IPV.**

## INTRODUCTION

It is now recognized that intimate partner violence (IPV), more commonly known as domestic violence, is a significant international social problem (Humphreys 2007). European statistics show that one in four women experience domestic violence and the World Health Organization multi-country study revealed prevalence figures of between 15% and 71% for lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual abuse for women (Garcia-Moreno *et al.* 2006). In a number of wide ranging studies, this form of violence has also been shown to co-exist with child abuse and child neglect (Edleson 1999; Humphreys 2000; Buckley *et al.* 2006; Humphreys & Stanley 2006; Devaney 2008) and is therefore increasingly interlinked with social work child protection services and assessments (Farmer & Owen 1995; Kelly 1996; Black *et al.* 1999; Humphreys 2000; Holt 2003; Devaney 2008). Ferguson & O'Reilly's (2001) study of child protection case

files in an Irish Community Care setting found that 74% cited domestic violence as either the only problem or one among other problems. Despite these findings of the prevalence of such violence in social work caseloads, and the impact on children of exposure to such violence (Holt *et al.* 2008; Meltzer *et al.* 2009), research has been ambivalent on the effectiveness of social workers' understanding and consequently their interventions in cases of domestic violence. Humphreys' (2000) study of social work practice in Coventry Social Services reviewed 32 case files (involving 93 children) and interviewed the social workers who had worked with these families. The study concluded that practice was changing and varied, with examples of both good and worryingly poor practice. She also found that there was a lack of awareness by the social workers of the effects of domestic violence on the lives of both women and children. Waugh & Boner (2002) found in their study of social work practitioners in statutory and non-

statutory agencies, that practice was underpinned by workers' theoretical understandings of domestic violence. They concluded that 'practitioners who were unclear and simplistic in their definition of domestic violence, struggled to determine who their client was and the direction of their intervention' (p. 288). They place the root of these difficulties primarily in the social workers' education, training and ongoing supervision as well as in interagency liaison. Humphreys and Stanley (2006) came to a similar conclusion in assessing social work practice with abused women and their children.

As a result of this increasing awareness of the role of social work practitioners in domestic violence and its inherent risk to children's welfare, the importance of understanding the dynamics and impact of such violence must be taken seriously by social work educators, managers and practitioners. Concerns have been raised regarding the non recognition of such violence by social workers and on the nature and value of assessment tools (Hester & Radford 1996; Roehl *et al.* 2005; Breckenridge & Ralfs 2006; Hester 2006; Humphreys 2007), in assisting such recognition and in planning interventions.

Added to these pre-existing concerns, social work practice has more recently been complicated by another emerging discourse in the area of domestic violence, namely the discourse of 'gender symmetry'. A comprehensive understanding of the background to and complexity of this gender symmetry debate is therefore essential if practitioners are to be able to make accurate and theoretically well informed assessments. This paper will therefore trace the background to this divisive debate, and will outline the most recent research which places these statistical disputes in a more helpful context.

## GENDER SYMMETRY: ARE WOMEN AS VIOLENT AS MEN?

The gender neutral view of IPV began with the work of Straus *et al.* (1980), Straus & Gelles (1990), Stets & Straus (1990) and Steinmetz (1977/78). Using the data from the 1975 and 1985 National Family Violence Surveys (NFVS) in the USA, Straus and his colleagues found, that while 12.1% of wives were victims of their husband's violence in the year prior to the 1975 survey, 11.6% of husbands were victims of their wives' violence. In the 1985 survey, these figures had changed to 11.3% of wives and 12.1% of husbands being victims of violence. This prompted Stets & Straus (1990, p. 227) to conclude that the

marriage licence is a 'hitting licence' and that the rates of perpetrating spousal violence were higher for wives than for husbands. Using the NFVS and related data, Steinmetz (1977/78) ignited the symmetry debate by proposing the existence of the 'battered husband syndrome'. In her paper of this title, she quotes a number of studies which she claims, found that rates of violence by men and women were either 'identical' or 'very similar' or that the violence of wives 'exceeds that of husbands' (p.499–503). Her paper was met with charges of 'the battered data syndrome' (Pleck *et al.* 1977/78) in which the data on which Steinmetz based her conclusions was examined and her analysis severely criticized. For example, Pleck *et al.* (1977/78, p. 680) state quite bluntly, that 'a summary statement that the percentage of wives having used physical violence "often exceeds" that of husbands is incorrect and even irresponsible'. McNeely & Robinson-Simpson (1987, p. 486) rode to her defence by arguing that 'Straus and Gelle's data demonstrate that women are as violent, if not more violent than men.'

These claims were challenged in an almost forensically detailed fashion in papers by Saunders (1988) and Schwartz & DeKeseredy (1993). In his critique, Saunders takes issue with the homicide figures quoted by McNeely and Robinson-Simpson, and like Pleck *et al.* (1977/78), he accused Steinmetz and McNeely and Robinson-Simpson of being 'selective in the data they presented'.

## The conflict tactics scale (CTS)

The primary target of the critiques of the gender symmetry figures has been the reliability of the CTS which was originally developed by Straus and Gelles at the University of New Hampshire in the 1970s and used (in slightly differing forms) in their survey research. Given the controversial role that the CTS has played in domestic violence literature (e.g. Saunders 1988, 2002; Schwartz & DeKeseredy 1993; Straton 1994; Currie 1998; Kimmel 2002), it is useful to review both its structure and the theoretical approach which underpins it. Firstly, it is premised on the inevitability of conflict in human relationships and by extension the existence of conflict between all the configurations of family relationships, i.e. parents–children, sibling and spousal. In his introduction to the 1990 report, Straus distinguishes between 'conflict', 'conflict of interest' and 'hostility', adopting Coser's (1957) understanding of conflict as the 'tactics' used in response to a conflict of interest. The

resulting CTS scale therefore is designed to measure the forms and extent of these 'conflict tactics', within the family which are divided into three principal modes: reasoning, verbal aggression and physical aggression.

The standardized questions used in the scale explicitly measure the use of one or more of these behaviours in response to a conflict or anger situation during the previous 12 months, but does not refer to the substantive issue giving rise to the anger or conflict. The scale has been adapted a number of times, and a slightly different scale was used in each of the NFV studies. In view of the sensitive nature of family violence and the perceived difficulty of getting a random population sample to reply to a questionnaire asking them about such private and potentially illegal acts, it is surprising that the 1985 survey achieved an 84% response rate. Straus (1990, p. 5: 29–47) acknowledges that the presentation of the instrument 'in the context of disagreements' was designed to facilitate and legitimize responses. Presenting IPV as simply one way in which conflicts get resolved, decontextualized and devoid of any reference to either the motivation or consequences of these actions, has been one of the major criticisms of the CTS.

### Critiques of the CTS

However, the primary critique of the CTS has concentrated on what the scale actually measures. Mahoney *et al.* (2001) query the use of discreet acts of physical violence (such as throwing an object) that have occurred in the previous year and their classification as minor or severe without reference to the context or consequences. Other critics of the CTS have noted that focusing on physical violence alone can hide the atmosphere of terror and fear that permeates abusive relationships. Qualitative studies have shown that many women find emotional and psychological abuse even more intolerable than physical abuse (Watson & Parsons 2005; Heise & Garcia-Moreno 2002; Mahoney *et al.* 2001).

Dobash & Dobash (1992, 2004) writing in the UK, have been among the strongest critics of the CTS and have drawn attention to a number of problems with the instrument. They point to the danger of combining forms of violence in a 'sum index' with the result that 'two slaps are counted the same as two knife attacks'. They also point to the error of distinguishing between violence as 'minor' and 'severe' because this is based on the assumption that

the latter entails a greater risk of injury, though this has never been demonstrated empirically (1992: 280). Straton (1994, p. 80) identifies three 'major flaws' in Straus's CTS-based work, including equating a single slap by a woman to a man's '15 year history of domestic terrorism'. Saunders (2002, p. 1430) points out that it ignores both violence which occurs post separation and sexual violence. Currie (1998, p. 101) suggests that the problem with the CTS is that it is 'research rather than theory driven' with the result that even though Gelles & Straus (1988) themselves recognize that power and control are cited by both men and women research participants, these 'disappear from their interpretation of findings from the CTS' (Currie 1998, p. 102). Melton & Belknap (2003) note that the CTS studies interview only one person in the relationship, but that a different picture may emerge if the other partner had also been interviewed.

### The debate continues

The second US NFVS (Stets & Straus 1990, pp. 151–165) finding that 'women assault their partners at about the same rate as men' and that they may even be more likely to initiate violence than their partners, accentuated the debate, and again both the data and methodology have been rigorously critiqued. Stets & Straus (1990) proffer an explanation for their controversial findings by suggesting that (i) battered women may incorporate violence in their own behavioural repertory; (ii) they may adopt the norm of reciprocal violence; and (iii) the use of violence in one sphere, such as child care, may carry over into their marital relationship (p. 162). However, their findings do show that women are more likely to use less severe violence than their male partners, and that women are more likely to sustain more serious injury requiring more medical care and sick leave. Intriguingly, they attempt to explain this latter point by suggesting that women may find it easier to adopt the 'sick role' as they have fewer work and time constraints than men.

### Critiques of gender symmetry: the new millennium

As the debate continues into this millennium, Kimmel (2002) and Saunders (2002) have reviewed a range of studies which have followed on the work of Straus and Gelles, Stets and Steinmetz, and which claim to replicate their findings of sexual symmetry. Kimmel focuses particularly on the meta analysis by Archer (2000) and review by Fiebert (1997) which cite 100

empirical studies which suggest equivalent rates of violence for both sexes. Having reviewed the methodology of all of the 76 studies and 16 literature reviews, Kimmel (2002, p. 1336) concludes that Fiebert's 'scholarly annotated bibliography thus turns out to be far more of an ideological polemic than a serious scholarly undertaking'. Both he and Saunders (2002) compare the data found in US Crime Victimization studies with the family violence studies which use the CTS and support the gender symmetry thesis. The former, unlike the CTS-based studies, include sexual assaults, ask about assaults by ex-spouses or ex-partners, and tend to have larger sample sizes (usually national- or state-wide). They uniformly find gender asymmetry in rates of domestic violence. One of these large-scale victimization studies, the 1998 National Violence Against Women survey in the USA, found that men physically assaulted their partners at three times the rate at which women assaulted their partners (Tjaden & Thoennes 2000).

Saunders (2002) notes three limitations of the Archer (2000) and Fiebert (1997) reviews: (i) they fail to include the motives of each partner; (ii) they ignore the rates of initiation of violence by each partner and in particular episodes; and (iii) they ignore the physical and psychological consequences of the violence to each partner (p. 1429). In situations where men or women are killed by their partners, Saunders (2002) asserts that studies show that the use of violence in self-defence is estimated to be 7–10 times less frequent for husbands than for wives.

### Comparing differing methodologies

As one of the criticisms of the CTS methodology is that closed questions do not give any understanding of the motivations and consequences of the reported violence, Currie (1998) explored the meaning of such quantitative research findings for both female and male participants. Using a sample of university students in the USA (including both single and co-habituating students), she adapted the CTS questionnaire to include open-ended questions. She found that male students were more likely to disclose proportionately more violent incidents against them than women, a finding that if produced by a study using only the usual CTS tick box questionnaire, could be added to the list that support gender symmetry among young dating or co-habituating couples. However, her qualitative data found that 'men tend to upgrade women's violent behaviour . . . and that in contrast women may downgrade the significance of men's

behaviour'. These findings lead her to question the validity of the CTS as an 'accurate measure of either the extent or the nature of violence in heterosexual relations' (p. 106–107).

Melton & Belknap (2003, p. 346) also used both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in their study of women and men arrested for IPV offences in the USA, and found 'profound' gender differences. They concluded that 'more detailed contextual accounts document greater gender differences, consistent with the feminist analysis, than do quantitative checklist'. This conclusion highlights the necessity of developing and utilizing research methodologies which can contextualize both partners' use of physical, sexual and psychological violence (Allen & Forgey 2007).

### Consequences of and motivations for violence

Hamberger's (2005) detailed review of studies which used clinical samples to compare women's and men's use of violence supports this view. These studies found that in such samples (e.g. batterers' treatment programmes, A&E attendees, men and women arrested for domestic assault, couples attending marital counselling), while 80% of the violence was bi-directional, there were profound differences between women's and men's perpetration of and experience of violence. They found that women were likely to experience greater psychological impact (including much higher rates of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and anxiety), were more likely to be severely injured, and reported much higher levels of fear. Studies which explored motivations for using violence found that women were significantly more likely to use violence to 'protect themselves', while men report using violence significantly more than women 'to show the partner who is the boss' (p. 138). They summarize the findings of this review of a wide range of clinical studies by suggesting that men tend to use violence 'to dominate and control their partners', while women 'tend to use violence to protect themselves or retaliate against prior violence' (p. 139). However, they point out that there are a small number of women who use violence to dominate and control, and a small number of men who do not initiate violence, do not use it to control their partners and suffer severe injuries.

Swan *et al.* in a number of papers (Swan & Snow 2002, 2006; Swan *et al.* 2007), have explored the use of violence by women against their intimate partners. In their 2007 paper, Swan *et al.* review what they

describe as this 'small but growing research area'. Their review of this research leads them to the same conclusions as those drawn by Hamberger (2005). Like Hamberger, they suggest that the research concludes that women's violence usually occurs in the context of violence against them by their intimate partners, is usually motivated by self-defence and fear, and in situations of 'intimate terrorism' they are less likely to be perpetrators and more likely to be victims. They are also more likely to experience negative effects than men. They are rarely sexually abusive, are less likely to use violence for the purposes of coercive control and less likely to stalk their partners (Swan *et al.* 2007).

These findings are similar to those of Dobash & Dobash (2004), in their UK study (which used both qualitative and quantitative methodologies) of 95 couples in which both parties used violence. They also concluded that women did not use violence in the context of control or coercion. Women's violence usually, though not always, occurred in the context of self-defence, and did not lead to as serious injury as men's violence. Men tended to report this violence as 'inconsequential', and they rarely if ever sought protection from the authorities.

A recently published UK longitudinal study (Hester 2009) found a number of clear differences between male and female perpetration of violence. Men's violence created a climate of fear and control, was more likely to be severe violence and involve repeat assaults. Women were more likely to use a weapon, although this was often to prevent further violence from their partners. Women were three times more likely than men to be arrested when they perpetrated violence.

The impact of a gender neutral approach to domestic violence has also been found in US arrests policies with unexpectedly negative impacts for abused women themselves. In her 2001 qualitative study of the impact of gender neutral pro arrest policies in the USA, Miller (2001, pp. 1339–1375) points out that despite a significant rise in the numbers of women arrested and charged for domestic violence, not one of her respondents (e.g. treatment providers, counsellors, shelter directors and workers, prosecutors, police, defence attorneys, public defenders, probation officers) believed that women's violence was increasing. The increase of female arrests was explained by changes in police policies and a fear of being named in a lawsuit for failure to arrest, as well as to 'men's greater awareness of how to use the criminal justice system to their advantage'.

### Why do men disappear in official statistics?

One of the commonest explanations for the clear disparity between the avowed gender symmetry of domestic violence and the invisibility of battered men in police and hospital statistics is by reference to the social stigma of admitting to being abused by one's female partner. As Steinmetz (1977/78: 503) notes 'the stigma . . . which is embarrassing for beaten wives, is doubly so for beaten husbands'. Dobash *et al.* (1992, p. 76) counter this suggestion, citing Schwartz's (1987) analysis of the 1973/82 US National Crime Survey Data, which found that 67.2% of men and 56.8% of women called the police after an assault by their partners. They also cite Kincaid's (1982) study of family court cases in Ontario which found that while there were 17 times as many female as male victims of domestic violence, only 22% of the women pressed charges in contrast to 40% of the men, and men were less likely to drop the charges (p. 91).

Taft *et al.* (2001, p. 500), using Australian data, state categorically that there is no 'empirical evidence that men are more likely than women to under-report to police, hospitals or to seek help'. Watson & Parsons' (2005, p. 77) Irish prevalence study found that men were more likely to tell someone about the abuse they were experiencing: 'about half of the women, compared to three quarters of the men had told someone within a year.' Data such as this clearly challenges the common perception that men are too ashamed to report violence by their partners.

Kimmel's (2002) conclusion, taking into account the limitations of the CTS-based studies, and including sexual assaults, homicides and post-separation violence, is that, rather than being a gender symmetrical expression of family conflict, 'the gender ratio of male-perpetrated violence to female-perpetrated violence would be closer to 4:1. On the other hand, violence that is instrumental in the maintenance of control – the more systematic, persistent, and injurious type of violence – is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men, with rates captured best by crime victimization studies. More than 90% of this violence is perpetrated by men' (p. 1358).

### Making distinctions

These debates about the directionality and symmetry of domestic violence appear to be both mutually exclusive and antagonistic. However, the last decade has seen a number of theoretical and methodological developments which have been attempting to traverse

these competing territories with theories of distinctions and typologies. The first of these developments, and perhaps the best known to date, is that of Michael Johnson (1995 2006). His 1995 paper addressed the twin issues of the conflicting evidence regarding prevalence and gender symmetry as presented by the family violence and feminist theorists. Asking 'How on earth could two groups of social scientists come to such different conclusions?', he suggests that they are in fact analysing two different and mostly non-overlapping phenomena. In order to reconcile the startling discrepancies in data between general population studies and studies of women accessing shelters, hospitals, police and other helping services, he distinguishes between patriarchal terrorism (PT), which conforms to the dynamics of power and control, involves severe violence which tends to escalate over time, causing serious injury requiring treatment, and often separation, and common couple violence (CCV), which involves more minor violence and is less a product of patriarchy and more a product of the conflict issues suggested by Straus & Gelles (1990).

#### Further distinctions

In his more recent papers (Johnson & Ferraro 2000; Johnson & Leone 2005; Johnson 1995, 2006), Johnson creates further distinctions between differing patterns of violence. Having abandoned PT for intimate terrorism (IT), he adds 'violent resistance' (VR) and 'mutual violent control' (MVC) and renamed CCV as situational couple violence (SCV). He prefers the term VR to 'self-defence', which is perpetrated almost entirely by women, but admits that he 'presented no detailed analysis of its characteristics.' MVC, a substitute for the occasionally used term 'mutual combat', describes situations where two intimate terrorists battle for control, a situation that he concedes is rare and about which we know very little (Johnson & Ferraro 2000, p. 950).

#### Support for these distinctions

Graham-Kevan & Archer (2003) replicated and extended Johnson & Ferraro's (2000) study which sought to empirically identify the CCV and IT patterns of violence. Using an English mixed sex population sample, a shelter sample, and a CTS style questionnaire, which, they claim, obtained both self and partner report data for the first time in Britain, they measured physical aggression, controlling behaviour and emotional abuse. Their findings supported

Johnson's earlier work in the USA and his distinctions regarding patterns of violence. As hypothesized, they found that IT was primarily perpetrated by males (87%), while CCV was almost sexually symmetric (45% male and 55% female). As predicted, 70% of all IT was experienced by the shelter population. Only 6% of CCV was found in the shelter sample, with 94% of the CCV in the community sample. Hypotheses regarding the escalation and severity in IT were also supported, as were the relationship between physical aggression and coercion. The finding that VR was almost exclusively female (90%) also supports the distinctions between male and female aggression in relationships. These findings led Graham-Kevan & Archer (2003) to conclude that PT and CCV differ significantly in levels of physical violence, injuries, fear and controlling behaviours.

Rosen *et al.* (2005)'s qualitative study also examined the validity of Johnson & Ferraro's (2000) typology. They recruited a small sample of couples experiencing marital conflict through public advertisements, and despite some acknowledged difficulties, were able to categorize the couples into four separate types of IPV. The majority, 11 of the 15, were categorized as examples of CCV, one couple as MVC, two as VR. Not surprisingly, as the small sample was drawn from a community sample, and both partners had to agree to participate, they could not classify any couple as IT. However, they did introduce a new typology, 'Pseudo-Intimate Terrorism (PIT)', because one partner (the female) exercised coercive control over her male partner, she did not use 'severe violence' and he did not report great fear. This supports the studies of women's violence discussed above, in which men do not experience elevated levels of fear (Hamberger 2005; Swan *et al.* 2007). Given the difficulty these researchers had in identifying some of the couples in an appropriate typology, they are correct to conclude that, if these typologies are to be helpful to practitioners, they must be clear enough to be useful in making clinical and judicial decisions. Different types of violence will need different types of interventions, and no single factor can explain all types of intimate violence (Rosen *et al.* 2005, p. 330).

Johnson himself investigated the validity of his IPV typology (Johnson & Leone (2005; Johnson 2006). He utilized a mixed sample (i.e. both an 'agency sample' and a general population sample) to investigate the difference in the levels of violence and control tactics between the four 'types' of violent couples (IT, VR, SCV, MVC) and found that violence was less frequent

in men's SCV, and less likely to escalate. Violence was more frequent and there were more injuries in IT than in SCV. In men's IT, women rarely respond with violence, while they are much more likely to respond with violence in men's SCV. He concludes that the data 'do not leave much doubt that IT and SCV are not the same phenomenon' (p. 1010). In his paper with Leone (Johnson & Leone 2005) they examined the differential effects of male IT violence and SCV. Using data from the US National Violence Against Women Survey, which interviewed (by telephone) 8005 men and 8000 women, they concluded that there was a clear difference in the consequences for women from both forms of violence. Women who experience IT are attacked more frequently, the violence is less likely to stop, they are more likely to be injured and to suffer PTSD, to use painkillers and to miss work. They are also more likely to leave their partners and to find their own residences or other places of safety when they leave.

Watson & Parsons (2005), in their Irish National Prevalence study, also found that women experiencing severe violence were 10 times more likely than men to require a stay in hospital as a result of this abuse. Women were also more likely than men to report being very frightened or distressed (93% vs. 63%) and to report that the violence had a major impact on their lives.

## DISCUSSION

The research which has grown from these 'most controversial' gender debates (Swan & Snow 2006, p. 1027) continues to confirm differential rates of violence by men and women (Dobash & Dobash 2004; Johnson & Leone 2005; Watson & Parsons 2005; Johnson 2006; Hester 2009) and the distinctive nature of coercive control and severe violence perpetrated primarily by men (Hamberger 2005; Stark 2007; Swan *et al.* 2007; Hester 2009).

From the social work practitioner's perspective, this body of research suggests that interventions in the area of IPV require greater awareness of both its dynamics and consequences. Simply asserting that such violence is gender neutral or that it is experienced only by women is likely to lead to unhelpful or dangerous practice. Given the difficulty that Rosen *et al.* (2005) had in their study, in identifying some of the couples in an appropriate typology, suggests that if these typologies are to be helpful to practitioners, they must be clear enough to be useful in making clinical decisions. Different types of violence will need differ-

ent types of interventions, and no single factor can explain all types of intimate violence. For example, referring a couple to marriage counselling may be the most appropriate intervention if the typology of violence was SCV. Referring a couple where one partner was engaging in 'intimate terrorism' would however be inappropriate and possibly dangerous.

It follows therefore that assessment tools, particularly risk assessment tools, must incorporate these patterns of violence between intimate partners. Perhaps the most helpful element in 'making distinctions' between these patterns of IPV would be to ensure that the issue of 'coercive control' (Stark 2007) is understood and incorporated in all assessment tools. Understanding women's use of violence as self-defence or retaliation for ongoing abuse by their partner could be misunderstood as 'mutual violence' if the dynamics of control and the differential experience of fear by abused women were not fully understood by a social worker or counsellor.

One of the primary issues that social work within the context of IPV encounters is the difficult task of ensuring that children can maintain contact with their fathers in a manner which does not expose them to further emotional or physical abuse. This involves the need to develop a means of working with abusive men, but this is also a contested area of research and practice. What has been described as the 'dichotomous' views of violent men permeates the differing approaches to working with them (Rivett 2010). Developing programmes which can focus on the ability of fathers to care for their children will need further development if their abusive behaviour is to be replaced by adequate and supportive caring.

The challenges for social work presented by these debates are formidable. Firstly, the need for adequate education to prepare workers to recognize IPV in their caseloads is essential. Developing and using appropriate risk assessment tools which can distinguish between the various typologies of family violence is necessary if appropriate forms of treatment are to be developed and utilized. Finding ways to work with both abusive men so that their wish to maintain safe contact with their children is respected, challenges contemporary treatment programmes for abusive men.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the recent debates surrounding the research which suggests that IPV is more complex and less unidimensional than was

originally suggested by the battered women's movement. This research, drawing as it does on different data sources and using different research methodologies, is challenging the concept that domestic violence is always perpetrated by males against their female partners. The reality, it suggests, is more complex and therefore requires more sophisticated research methodologies and more complex theoretical explanations (Kimmel 2002; Swan & Snow 2006; Hester 2009). The typologies proposed by Johnson & Ferraro (2000) are helpful approaches to addressing this complexity.

It is important that social workers fully understand the background to the gender symmetry debate and the outcomes of the many research studies which have grown from this debate. Not to be aware of these developments in the field of domestic violence will severely limit practitioners' ability to make accurate assessments in cases of domestic violence, and of child abuse within the context of such violence. It will also limit managers' ability to provide effective supervision for their staff and to support their assessments and interventions. The findings of Humphreys (2000) and Waugh & Bonner (2002), cited earlier, highlight the lack of awareness of the dynamics of domestic violence. To fully understand and make appropriate assessments will require a comprehensive understanding of the typologies of such violence, the dynamics which can be identified in each typology and the likely impacts on abused women and men and on their children. A lack of such understanding will continue to impact negatively on social workers' ability to make appropriate and effective interventions, and possibly lead to further worryingly poor practice and woman blaming in the child protection system.

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