



ADVANCING HEALTH EDUCATION & RESEARCH

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# AVA Research Review

## ADVANCING HEALTH EDUCATION & RESEARCH

**Review Title:** The importance of depolarizing the gender symmetry debate

**Reviewer:** Andrew T. Schramm, Doctoral Student in Clinical-Community Psychology at the University of South Carolina<sup>1</sup>

**Article(s):** Leisring, P. A. (2013). Physical and emotional abuse in romantic relationships: Motivation for perpetration among college women. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 28, 1437-1454.

#### **Article Summary:**

##### **Brief Overview:**

Background (from the perspective of Leisring)

Women perpetrate physical aggression against intimate partners (intimate partner violence; IPV) at rates comparable to or greater than men (Archer, 2000). While the "predominant feminist

assumptions regarding motivation in the domestic violence field are that men use IPV to gain power and control over their partners (Straus, 2006) and that women use IPV in the context of self-defense (Saunders, 1986; Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008)" (Leisring, 2013, p. 1438), this is "debatable" (p. 1439) given that women and men have reported similar reasons for perpetrating IPV (e.g., anger, retaliation for emotional hurt).

Existing measures that assess the self-reported reason for perpetrating IPV are limited in that they do not reflect the legal definition of self-defense: protecting oneself from imminent bodily harm (Black, 1991). For example, the Motivation and Effects Questionnaire (MEQ; Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd, & Sebastian, 1991) instructs participants to identify which of 13 reasons they were motivated to perpetrate IPV.

The item for self-defense, which reads “to protect self (i.e., self-defense),” is problematic because “the word ‘self-defense’ in their item might have influenced responses and their item was not clear regarding what the respondents were protecting themselves against (i.e., they could be protecting themselves from multiple types of abuse)” (Leisring, 2013, p. 1439). Another measure of the self-identified reason for perpetrating IPV, the Motives and Reasons for IPV Scale (Caldwell, Swan, Allen, Sullivan, & Snow, 2009), has similar limitations; two of the five self-defense items do not specifically assess whether IPV was perpetrated in order to protect oneself from physical abuse: “to defend yourself from your partner” and “because he became abusive when he drank.” As a result, those who endorse these items could be referring to protecting themselves from emotional abuse, which does not meet the legal definition of self-defense (protecting oneself from imminent bodily harm; Black, 1991).

Thus, the current study assessed the prevalence of IPV (both perpetration and victimization) in a sample of female college students. The self-identified reasons for perpetrating IPV were assessed using a modified version of the

MEQ that includes a self-defense item aligned with the legal definition of self-defense. A second aim was to assess the prevalence of emotional abuse and the self-identified reasons for emotionally abusing a partner.

### **Method:**

In this study, Leisring administered self-report measures described below to 348 heterosexual, female college students ( $M_{\text{age}}=18.8$ ,  $SD=1.2$ ; 89% white).<sup>2</sup>

1. The “physical assault” subscale, one of 6 subscales of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), was administered to assess the number of times each participant had perpetrated IPV and how many times they had been victimized by IPV.<sup>3,4</sup> This includes minor acts of aggression (e.g., “slapped your partner”) and severe ones (e.g., “burned or scalded your partner”). The “injuries” subscale was also administered, which includes items such as “Have you passed out from being hit on the head by your partner in a fight?” Participants indicate the frequency of these events on a scale from “0 times” to “More than 20 times”; however, in the current study, the responses were collapsed such that they were dichotomous (i.e., “yes, this has occurred” and “no, this has never occurred”).

2. Three out of four subscales of the Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse (MMEA; Murphy, Hoover, & Taft, 1999) were administered to measure both perpetration and victimization with respect to emotional abuse. The MMEA was scored dichotomously to indicate whether participants had perpetrated each of the three types of emotional abuse at any point.

3. A modified version of the Motivations and Effects Questionnaire (MEQ; Follingstad et al., 1991) was administered to assess the self-identified reasons for perpetrating physical aggression and emotional abuse (check all that apply format). Leisring made the following changes to the questionnaire: (1) the item that originally read “to protect self (i.e., self-defense)” was changed to “to protect self from immediate physical harm” in order to reflect the legal definition of self-defense; (2) the item that originally read “to get attention” was changed to “to get my partner’s attention” (rationale not explained); (3) the item “because it was sexually arousing” was deleted because it was not endorsed in a prior study; (4) the item “because of stress” was added because this was commonly endorsed as a reason for behaving violently in another study; (5) the item “to get my way” was added because it was endorsed in a

prior study; and (6) “to win an argument” was added because it was endorsed in a prior study. This measure was administered 5 times to each participant, once after each of the three emotional abuse subscales, and for the minor and severe aggression endorsed on the CTS2.

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<sup>2</sup> Because an important aspect of the study concerns changes to existing measures, they are described here in greater detail than would otherwise be necessary.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the limitations of this language, to increase clarity “perpetration of IPV” will subsequently be used to describe behaving violently toward an intimate partner and “victimized by IPV” will be used to describe an intimate partner behaving violently toward the respondent.

<sup>4</sup> Leisring erroneously writes that the “physical aggression” subscale was used.

### Results:

	Portion reporting perpetration	Portion reporting victimization
At least one act of emotional abuse	95%	Not reported by author
Minor physical aggression	30%	23%
Severe physical aggression	6%	5%
Physical injury	2.9%	6.6%

Of the women who had perpetrated physical

aggression, 38.7% had never been the victim of physical aggression. The most common reasons for engaging in emotional abuse were to show anger, because of stress, and in retaliation for emotional hurt. The most common reasons for engaging in physical aggression were to show anger, in retaliation for emotional hurt, and due to an inability to express self verbally. 4.8% of women engaging in physical aggression reported that self-defense was a motivation.

### Authors' Conclusions:

Leisring (2013) writes that these findings “seriously challenge the feminist notion that partner violence perpetrated by college women is due to self defense” (p. 1448) and suggests that “emotion regulation skills and stress management skills would be helpful for college women who use partner violence...” (p. 1450), especially dialectical behavior therapy and mindfulness approaches.

### Reviewer's Comments:

The main finding of this study is that only 4.8% of women who reported perpetrating intimate partner violence (IPV) endorsed “self-defense” as the reason for doing so. At the heart of efforts to determine

whether self-defense is the reason heterosexual women perpetrate IPV are the questions, “Are women really as likely to perpetrate IPV as men [gender symmetry]? If so, are the women really behaving violently or is it because they’re defending themselves from their violent partner?”

It appears that Leisring (2013) mischaracterized the current state of the field when describing her perception of the “predominant feminist assumptions” (p. 1438) regarding female-perpetrated IPV given that: (a) in 1999 a prominent feminist researcher challenged her colleagues to “take ownership of women’s use of violence in intimate relationships” (Renzetti, 2006, p. 1046, referring to Renzetti, 1999); that (b) three issues of the publication *Violence Against Women*, guest-edited by feminist researchers, have been dedicated to female-perpetrated violence (Bible, Das Dasgupta, & Osthoff, 2002a, 2002b, 2003); that (c) feminist researchers have developed a “Motives and Reasons for IPV Scale” in order to understand female-perpetrated violence (Caldwell et al.) ; and (d) in light of the progress that took place at the National Institute of Justice’s “Gender Symmetry Workshop” (Rosen, 2006).

In addition to inaccurately portraying the current state of the field, two other limitations bear mentioning. First, the author states that a strength of the study is its use of a definition of self-defense that is aligned with a legal definition. While some may view this as a strength, research on the use of the self-defense plea appears to have painted a much more complicated picture than Leisring does here. Where to draw the line in terms of what is considered self-defense appears not to be a clear-cut issue, as exemplified by studies on the legal outcomes of cases in which a woman in an abusive relationship kills her partner and uses the self-defense plea (e.g., Hodell, Dunlap, Wasarhaley, & Golding, 2012). It appears that some may view responding violently to a historically abusive and injurious partner who states, "I'm going to kill you" as a form of self-defense despite the absence of "imminent bodily harm," which is requisite in the definition used here. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, this study is descriptive in nature; the data presented here do not equip the author to make inferential statements about the population based on the sample at hand. In other words, the generalizations made by the author (e.g., college women who use

partner violence would benefit from learning emotion regulation skills) seem miscalibrated given the limitations of these data.

Future studies should include males in order to allow for more direct comparisons and should address limitations of current self-report measures (e.g., CTS2; see Archer, 2000). Finally, researchers and practitioners should keep in mind that despite some evidence of gender symmetry in terms of perpetration, it is clear that asymmetry exists with respect to the impact of violence: women are much more likely to be injured, killed, or to have psychological impairment as a result of IPV (Strauss, 2009). While the data presented in this article are limited, they appear to confirm this.

Writing a review of this article has been difficult for me. While I am new to this area of the literature, I have spent years working with victims of violence in mental health settings and at a crisis center. I, like the readers of this newsletter, have seen the devastating impact of violence, and as I read this area of the literature it is hard not to have in mind the individuals impacted by violence whose journey I have witnessed. Frankly, in reviewing the literature on this topic, I have

felt disappointed by the polarized nature of much of the literature on gender symmetry, which seems analogous to the partisan nature of Congress. Let us remember that the purpose of this medium is to harness the power of science in order to progress our understanding of a pervasive, complex societal issue.

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