

# A Typology of Men Who Are Violent Toward Their Female Partners: Making Sense of the Heterogeneity in Husband Violence

Amy Holtzworth-Munroe<sup>1</sup>

Department of Psychology, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

## Abstract

Although much research on men who are violent toward their wives has involved comparisons of groups of violent and nonviolent men, there is increasing evidence that maritally violent men are not a homogeneous group. Several recent studies support a batterer typology that distinguishes maritally violent subgroups. In an effort to identify different underlying processes resulting in husband violence, this article discusses how these subgroups differ along descriptive dimensions and in terms of their correlates in a developmental model of husband violence. The results suggest the importance of at least two continua (i.e., antisociality and borderline personality features) for understanding the heterogeneity in husband violence. The results also demonstrate the necessity of further studying low levels of husbands' physical aggression and of considering batterer subtypes when designing treatment interventions.

## Keywords

batterer typology; husband violence

Violence of husbands toward their wives is a serious problem in this country. Data from nationally

representative surveys suggest that, each year, one out of every eight married men will be physically aggressive toward his wife and up to 2 million women will be severely assaulted by their partners (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Although husbands and wives engage in aggression against their partners at very similar prevalence rates, a series of studies has demonstrated that husband violence has more negative consequences than wife violence; for example, husband violence is more likely to result in physical injury and depressive symptomatology (see the review in Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Sandin, 1997). In attempting to understand the correlates and potential causes of husband violence, reviewers have noted that the most fruitful efforts have focused on characteristics of the violent man, as opposed to the female partner or the dyad (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). Indeed, much of the available data regarding husband violence has been gathered in studies comparing "violent" with "nonviolent" samples of men; in such studies, batterers are usually treated as a homogeneous group.

Recent research, however, has made it clear that maritally violent men are a heterogeneous group, varying along theoretically important dimensions. These findings suggest that the understanding of husband violence will be advanced by drawing attention to these differences. Comparing subtypes of vio-

lent men with each other, and pinpointing how each type differs from nonviolent men, may help researchers to identify different underlying processes resulting in violence.

## PREDICTED SUBTYPES

After conducting a comprehensive review of 15 previous batterer typologies, Stuart and I observed that batterer subtypes can be classified along three descriptive dimensions: (a) severity and frequency of marital violence, (b) generality of violence (i.e., within the family only or outside the family as well), and (c) the batterer's psychopathology or personality disorders (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). Using these dimensions, we proposed that three subtypes of batterers could be identified (i.e., family-only, dysphoric-borderline, and generally violent-antisocial).

*Family-only* batterers were predicted to be the least violent subgroup. We expected that they would engage in the least marital violence, the lowest levels of psychological and sexual abuse, and the least violence outside the home. We also predicted that men in this group would evidence little or no psychopathology. *Dysphoric-borderline* batterers were predicted to engage in moderate to severe wife abuse. Their violence would be primarily confined to the wife, although some extrafamilial violence might be evident. This group would be the most psychologically distressed (e.g., exhibiting depressed and anxious symptoms) and the most likely to evidence borderline personality characteristics (e.g., extreme emotional lability; intense, unstable interpersonal relationships; fear of rejection). Finally, *generally violent-antisocial* batterers were predicted to be the most vio-

lent subtype, engaging in high levels of marital violence and the highest levels of extrafamilial violence. They would be the most likely to evidence characteristics of antisocial personality disorder (e.g., criminal behavior and arrests, failure to conform to social norms, substance abuse).

We then integrated several intrapersonal models of aggression into a model outlining the developmental course of these differing types of husband violence (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). The model highlighted the importance of correlates of male violence as risk factors for the differing batterer subtypes. Both historical correlates (i.e., genetic and prenatal factors, childhood home environment and violence in the family of origin, association with delinquent peers) and proximal correlates (correlates more current and directly related to battering; i.e., attachment and dependency; impulsivity; social skills, in both marital and nonmarital relationships; and attitudes, both hostile attitudes toward women and attitudes supportive of violence) were considered.

Based on this model, we predicted that, among the subtypes of batterers, family-only batterers would evidence the lowest levels of risk factors. We proposed that the violence of these men would result from a combination of stress (personal, marital, or both) and low-level risk factors (e.g., childhood exposure to marital violence, lack of relationship skills), so that on some occasions during escalating marital conflicts, these men would engage in physical aggression. Following such incidents, however, their low levels of psychopathology and related problems (e.g., impulsivity, attachment dysfunction), combined with their positive attitudes toward women and negative attitudes toward violence, would lead to remorse and

help prevent their aggression from escalating.

In contrast, we hypothesized that dysphoric-borderline batterers come from a background involving parental abuse and rejection. As a result, these men would have difficulty forming a stable, trusting attachment with an intimate partner. Instead, they would be highly dependent on their wives, yet fearful of losing them and very jealous. They would be somewhat impulsive, lack marital skills, and have attitudes hostile toward women and supportive of violence. This group resembles batterers studied by Dutton (1995), who suggested that their early traumatic experiences lead to borderline personality characteristics, anger, and insecure attachment, which, in times of frustration, result in violence against the adult attachment figure (i.e., the wife).

Finally, we predicted that generally violent-antisocial batterers resemble other antisocial, aggressive groups. Relative to the other subtypes, they were expected to have experienced high levels of violence in their families of origin and association with deviant peers. They would be impulsive, lack relationship skills (marital and nonmarital), have hostile attitudes toward women, and view violence as acceptable. We conceptualized their marital violence as a part of their general use of aggression and engagement in antisocial behavior. In other words, their marital violence might not represent something unique about the dynamics of their intimate relationships, but rather might occur because wives are readily accessible victims for men who are often aggressive toward others.

### TESTING THE MODEL

We recently completed a study testing this model (Holtzworth-

Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, in press). From the community, we recruited 102 men who had been physically aggressive toward their wives in the past year; their wives also participated in the study. We included men who had engaged in a wide range of violence, in contrast to previous batterer typologies that were based on either clinical samples (i.e., men in treatment for domestic violence) or severely violent samples. In addition, we recruited two nonviolent comparison samples—couples who were experiencing marital distress and couples who were not.

Using measures of the descriptive dimensions (i.e., marital violence, general violence, personality disorder), we found that the three predicted subgroups of violent men emerged, along with one additional subgroup. There was general consistency in the subgroup placement of men across differing statistical solutions, although three men were placed into subgroups by the researchers, as they could fit into more than one subgroup.

The predicted subgroups generally differed as hypothesized along the descriptive dimensions and in terms of the developmental model's correlates of violence (i.e., childhood home environment, association with deviant peers, impulsivity, attachment, skills, attitudes). In addition, other recent batterer typologies have generally supported our predicted subgroups. Two studies of severely violent men (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Tweed & Dutton, 1998) identified subgroups that resembled our most violent subgroups (i.e., dysphoric-borderline and generally violent-antisocial). A third study, of more than 800 batterers entering domestic violence treatment, found three subgroups that closely resembled our proposed subtypes (Hamberger, Lohr, Bonge, & Tolin, 1996). Thus, our original three subgroup descriptions have

generally been supported and describe the three main subtypes emerging in recent research.

The fourth, unpredicted cluster that emerged we labeled the *low-level antisocial* group, given their moderate scores on measures of antisociality, marital violence, and general violence. On many measures, this group fell intermediate to the family-only and generally violent-antisocial groups (i.e., family-only men had lower scores; generally violent-antisocial men had higher scores). This new group probably corresponds to our originally proposed family-only group; the levels of violence and antisociality in this fourth group are similar to those predicted for the family-only group, which was derived from previous typologies of severely violent men. In contrast, in our study, in which the low-level antisocial group emerged, the sample was recruited from the community and included less violent men. Consequently, we believe that what was labeled the family-only group in our study had not been included in previous batterer typologies, but rather resembles the less violent men often found in studies of newlyweds, couples in marital therapy, and couples in the community who are not seeking therapy and have not been arrested for violence (i.e., community samples). We hope that our four-cluster typology will bridge a recognized gap in this research area—between research examining generally low levels of violence among community samples and research examining severe violence among clinical samples, that is, people who are seeking help in therapy or have been referred to therapy by the courts (e.g., “common couple violence” vs. “patriarchal terrorism”; Johnson, 1995).

Low levels of physical aggression (such as found among family-only batterers) are so prevalent as to be almost normative (statisti-

cally) in U.S. culture; one third of engaged and newly married men engage in low levels of physical aggression (e.g., O’Leary et al., 1989). Yet, we do not understand how these less violent men differ from men who are experiencing marital distress or conflict but who do not engage in physical aggression; for example, on our study measures (e.g., of psychopathology, attachment, impulsivity, skills, attitudes, family of origin, peer experiences, wives’ depression, and marital satisfaction), family-only batterers did not differ from nonviolent, maritally distressed men. It is thus tempting to assume that low levels of aggression do not lead to particularly pernicious outcomes, at least not above and beyond effects attributable to marital distress. This, however, is not the case, as a recent longitudinal study of newlyweds demonstrated that even low levels of physical aggression predicted marital separation or divorce better than did marital distress or negative marital communication (Rogge & Bradbury, 1999). Thus, although previous batterer typologies have focused on severely violent samples, we believe that lower levels of male physical aggression also deserve attention.

It is possible to conceptualize three of our violent subtypes (i.e., family-only, low-level antisocial, and generally violent-antisocial) as falling along a continuum of antisociality (e.g., family-only batterers have the lowest levels of violence, antisocial behavior, and risk factors; generally violent-antisocial men have the highest; the new cluster has intermediate levels). However, the dysphoric-borderline group cannot be easily placed along this continuum, as these men had the highest scores on a different set of theoretically coherent variables (i.e., fear of abandonment, preoccupied or fearful attachment, dependency). This raises the possibility that two dimensions

(i.e., antisociality and borderline personality characteristics) are needed to describe all of the subgroups.

No previous researchers have examined the stability of batterer typologies, but it has been suggested that the various subtypes could exemplify different developmental phases of violence rather than stable clusters. This point is particularly important when considering the family-only and low-level antisocial groups. We predict that some men will remain in these groups, whereas others will escalate their levels of abuse. Indeed, longitudinal research has demonstrated that although severe husband violence predicts the occurrence of future violence, violence is less stable among less severely violent men (e.g., Quigley & Leonard, 1996). The problem, at this point, is that researchers and clinicians cannot predict which men in the less severely violent groups will escalate their violence.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The batterer subtypes were found to have differing levels of marital violence. At this time, however, we need further theoretical development regarding whether the nature of aggression, and the motivation for it, differs across subtypes of maritally violent men. For example, it is possible to speculate that the violence of generally violent-antisocial men is instrumental (e.g., goal motivated, premeditated), whereas the violence of the other groups is more expressive (i.e., motivated by anger, frustration, and emotional dysregulation). The answers to such questions await future research.

At this time, it also is unclear if one unifying variable or theory will be able to explain the development of all subtypes of violent husbands (e.g., Dutton, 1995, has fo-

cused on an attachment model; our data suggest the importance of antisociality). Our own model is a multivariate one (e.g., attachment, impulsivity, skills, attitudes), based on our belief that more than one variable will be necessary to explain differing developmental pathways; however, this question is currently untested.

We also do not yet understand how differing types of husband violence emerge in the context of varying settings and environments. Our typology emphasizes characteristics of the individual; it is an intrapersonal model, focusing on individual differences. Yet, husband violence occurs in the context of interpersonal relationships, communities and subcultures, and society. Thus, future researchers may wish to consider the societal and interpersonal, as well as the intrapersonal, causes of violence and the interaction of factors at these differing levels of analysis.

Prospective studies are needed to identify the developmental pathways resulting in different subtypes of violent husbands. Future longitudinal studies should examine constructs assumed to predict the use of violence among adolescents or children and then observe the relationship between these variables and the emergence of relationship violence as study participants enter intimate relationships.

Future researchers also should examine how various subtypes of violent men respond to different treatment programs. At the present time, the overall effectiveness of

batterers' treatment is not impressive (e.g., Rosenfeld, 1992). Along with others, we have suggested that this may be due to the fact that therapists do not match interventions to batterer subtypes. Initial supportive evidence comes from a study comparing two different treatments; batterers who scored high on an antisocial measure did better in a structured cognitive-behavioral-feminist intervention (e.g., focusing on skills and attitudes), and batterers scoring high on a measure of dependency did better in a new process-psychodynamic intervention (e.g., examining past traumas in the men's lives; Saunders, 1996).

In summary, research on batterer typologies makes it increasingly clear that violent husbands are not a homogeneous group, and that it is no longer adequate to conduct studies comparing violent and nonviolent men. Instead, researchers must systematically examine variability among violent men, along relevant theoretical dimensions of interest. Such research will help identify the different pathways to violence.

### Recommended Reading

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### Note

1. Address correspondence to Amy Holtzworth-Munroe, Department of

Psychology, 1101 East 10th St., Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405-7007.

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