

THE POLITICS OF RESEARCH: THE USE, ABUSE, AND MISUSE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA—THE CASES OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

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This article examines the issue of how research is utilized, abused, and misused in policy and practice in the area of intimate partner violence (IPV). The article reviews and critically analyzes facts set forth for the purpose of claiming that IPV is a significant social problem and finds that many of these facts lack empirical support. The lack of evidence that supports theoretical explanations for IPV and recommended interventions hinders the ability to adequately respond to the problem of IPV.

Keywords: *family violence; domestic violence; violence toward women; intimate partner violence; batterer intervention programs; couples counseling*

In the 1970s movie, *Bang the Drum Slowly*, two of the main characters—a star pitcher and a team coach—engage in a small-scale swindle in the lobbies of the hotels the baseball team stays in during road trips. The pitcher and coach sit in a conspicuous spot in the lobby and begin a heated card game. Pretty soon a few observers gather to watch the game. Eventually, a curious observer, thoroughly confused by watching a game that he has never seen played before, asks the pitcher and coach what they are playing. “TEGWAR,” they respond. After a few more minutes, the onlooker asks if he can play and is invited to sit in. The newcomer wins a few hands, but still has no clue what he is doing. The hands get faster and faster, the cards fly, and eventually the newcomer gets on a losing streak—still completely befuddled by the game and what exactly is happening. When another teammate asks about the game and asks what TEGWAR stands for, he is told it means, “That Exciting Game Without Any Rules.”

As intimate partner violence (IPV) evolved from a private matter hidden behind closed doors into a significant policy, practice, and research issue, I came to understand that policy and practice seemed to be more influenced by ideologies and political values than actual research and evidence. National legislation, state legislation, and government and foundation funding flew as fast as the cards in a game of TEGWAR. While it took years to get Congress to enact the Violence Against Women Act (1994), once the ice was broken amendments and revision of laws were easier to accomplish. The new federal law also guided state and local practice and established funding streams for programs for victims, but rarely for offenders.

This article, which somewhat whimsically applies the TEGWAR metaphor, examines the rather serious issue of how research is utilized, abused, and misused in policy and practice in the area of IPV.

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NINE FACTOIDS AND A MANTRA

In the early 1990s, the fields of IPV and child abuse and neglect were stuck—but for different reasons. Research and advocates whose concern was violence toward women were confident that the extent of violence and the harmful consequences of victimization were widespread enough to justify national legislation and a significant commitment of federal funds. Local grassroots efforts had defined the nature of the problem of violence toward women, generated local funding for shelters, and used class-action lawsuits to force more appropriate judicial policies regarding battered women. Child welfare advocates secured a small commitment from the federal government with the enactment of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act in 1974. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 was designed to address the problem of foster care drift—as the number of children in foster care, and the length of time they remained in foster care, had skyrocketed in the 1970s. Nonetheless, efforts to enact federal legislation that addressed violence toward women stalled—sometimes a bill would pass, but the administration would fail to provide funding; other times the legislation would just die in committee.

The election of Bill Clinton and Al Gore in 1992, after 12 years of Republican presidencies, was seen as a sign that legislative initiatives were more likely to succeed. The Clinton/Gore inauguration ushered in a new wave of advocacy efforts aimed at capturing policy attention and new funding. The week of the 1993 inauguration, not coincidentally, marked the first release of the claim that Super Bowl Sunday was the most violent day of the year and that emergency room admissions of victims of domestic violence were the highest in the wake of the Super Bowl.¹

Advocacy for victims of domestic violence led to national conferences, which provided forums for keynote speakers to present data on the extent, nature, and consequences of violence toward women. The 1994 Academy Award-winning documentary, *Defending Our Lives*, was another forum for the presentation of compelling evidence about violence toward women. Lastly, the media attention that focused on the murders of Nicole Brown-Simpson and Ron Goldman, and the subsequent criminal and civil trials of celebrity athlete/actor/pitchman O.J. Simpson, provided yet another forum for advocates and claims making on behalf of victims of domestic violence.

THE FACTS (OR FACTOIDS)

The compelling research evidence solidified around a series of statements that captured the problem of violence toward women. The most common, oft-spoken, and published factoids are as follows:²

- According to the FBI, a woman is beaten every (fill in the blank) seconds in the United States.
- There are four million women beaten and abused each year in the United States.
- Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women between the ages of 15 and 44 in the United States—greater than car accidents, muggings, and rapes combined.
- The March of Dimes reports that battering during pregnancy is the leading cause of birth defects and infant mortality [in the United States].
- Sixty-three percent of young men between the ages of 11 and 20, who are serving time for homicide have killed their mother's abuser.
- Seventy-five percent of women who are killed by intimate partners are killed after they attempt to leave their batterers.
- Women who kill their batterers receive longer prison sentences than men who kill their partners.

- There are nearly three times as many animal shelters in the United States as there are shelters for battered women and their children.
- Violence toward women crosses racial and income barriers—battering knows no color other than black and blue.

These factoids were augmented by a theoretical perspective on why woman battering was so common. According to the pro-feminist model, patriarchy, male power and privilege, allow men to use coercive control against their female partners. Such control includes physical violence, emotional and verbal abuse, sexual violence, and manipulation of finances and children.

While the factoids and pro-feminist theory drew increasing attention, I was concerned on two fronts. First, as I opined to the committee of the National Academy of Sciences that would ultimately publish the volume, *Understanding Violence Against Women* (National Research Council, 1996), the field of domestic violence was in danger of becoming little more than “Nine Factoids and a Mantra.” My second concern was that there was no actual empirical research evidence that supported most of the nine factoids and the pro-feminist theory. That the factoids would not be supported could ultimately reduce the credibility of the advocates. But, worse than that, policy and practice based on these factoids and theory might actually be harmful to women, men, children, and the institution of the family.

Before continuing on, it is perhaps useful to go back to the factoids and set the record straight as to which are supported by scientific evidence and which fall into the “advocacy statistics” category.

- According to the FBI, a woman is beaten every (fill in the blank) seconds in the United States.

First, the FBI does not calculate, tabulate, or track data on domestic violence. The FBI once did estimate that a woman is beaten every 15 seconds, but they derived this estimate from Murray A. Straus, Richard J. Gelles, and Suzanne K. Steinmetz’s book, *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family* (1980/2006).

Various other fact sheets list a myriad of other numbers of seconds. The number of seconds depends on the study (if there actually was one) and how violence was defined. For example, some versions of this factoid state that a woman is beaten every 9 seconds and cite a study done by the Commonwealth Fund in July 1993. The Commonwealth Fund study used the same measure as was used by Straus and his colleagues. Unlike Straus and his colleagues who defined abuse as acts of violence that were likely to cause an injury, the Commonwealth Fund defined abuse as everything from pushing, shoving, and slapping to using a gun or knife (Plichta, 1996).

- There are four million women beaten and abused each year in the United States.

This fact has the same limitation as the one that calculates that a woman is battered every (fill in the blank) seconds. The Straus et al. (1980/2006) survey estimated that two million women were abused each year by their husbands. Straus and his colleagues also speculated that if all the respondents told the truth, and if ex-husbands and boyfriends were included, the number could be as high as four million. However, no study to date using a representative sample and measuring severe violence has found more than two million abused women each year.

- Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women between the ages of 15 and 44 in the United States—more than car accidents, muggings, and rapes combined.

This factoid has been attributed to both former Surgeon General Antonia Novello and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The actual primary source of this factoid is research by Evan Stark and Ann Flitcraft (1988). It was Stark and Flitcraft who supplied the fact to CDC, who then included it in material supplied to the Surgeon General. Unfortunately, as good a sound bite as it is, the statement is simply not true. The original source of this statement goes back to two papers by Stark and Flitcraft (Stark, 1984; Stark & Flitcraft, 1981). First, the actual research on which the factoid is based is a rather small survey of one emergency room. Second, in the original articles, they stated that domestic violence *may* (emphasis added) be a more common cause of emergency room visits than car accidents, muggings, and rapes combined.

The late Linda Saltzman from the CDC told all journalists who called to check this factoid that the CDC does not recognize this as either its own fact or a reputable fact.

- The March of Dimes reports that battering during pregnancy is the leading cause of birth defects and infant mortality [in the United States].

The March of Dimes actually reports that they know of no such study.

- Sixty-three percent of young men between the ages of 11 and 20, who are serving time for homicide have killed their mother's abuser.

This factoid is often repeated by Sarah Buel, a former battered woman, assistant district attorney, and leading advocate in the field of domestic violence (Buel, 1992). It appears to be a fact from nowhere. The FBI has published no data that support this claim. The FBI's Uniform Crime Reports publishes no data on prison populations, let alone a table or figure that breaks down prison populations by age of offender and relationship to victim. There are no Department of Justice reports as to the number or percentages of young men who kill their mother's batterer.

- Seventy-five percent of women who are killed by intimate partners are killed after they attempt to leave their batterers.

Women are more likely to be victims of homicide when they are estranged from their husbands than when they live with their husbands. However, seventy-five percent of homicides *are not* women who have left abusive husbands. The risk of homicide is actually higher in the first 2 months after separation (Wilson & Daly, 1993).

- Women who kill their batterers receive longer prison sentences than men who kill their partners.

This fact is often attributed to someone from Pace University. There is no actual published source to support this. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics report, *Violence Between Intimates* (U.S. Department of Justice, 1994), the average prison sentence for men who have killed their wives was 17.5 years; the average sentence for women convicted of killing their husbands was 6.2 years.

- There are nearly three times as many animal shelters in the United States as there are shelters for battered women and their children.

As best as anyone knows, this is probably accurate, although no one I know of has actually done an exact count of each type of shelter.

- Violence toward women crosses racial and income barriers—battering knows no color other than black and blue.

This fact is accurate. It is also accurate to say that domestic violence is more likely to occur in homes below the poverty line, in minority households (even controlling for income), and among men and women 18 to 30 years of age (Gelles & Cavanaugh, 2003).

NEWER CLAIMS AND EVIDENCE

The field on violence toward women did evolve beyond the nine factoids—although the mantra of patriarchy and coercive control still is the dominant theoretical model. Along the way, there was a subtle change in terminology, so that woman battering, domestic violence, and even violence toward women are more often referred to as IPV by researchers and practitioners.

The more current assumptions about domestic violence are more practice-oriented and less focused on claims making regarding violence toward men as a social problem. Among the more widely stated assumptions are:

- IPV always escalates—offenders may begin with emotional violence but will eventually escalate to physical attacks and severe abusive violence. Stated another way: Batterers do not desist on their own.
- Only men are violent in abusive families.
- Arrest is an effective intervention and does bring about a cessation of violence.
- Batterers intervention programs that employ the Duluth model are effective.
- Couples counseling *is never* appropriate in cases of IPV.

As with the initial set of factoids, current assumptions, which are more value-based assumptions than advocacy statistics, have little scientific evidence to support them. In fact, the empirical evidence is often contrary to the assumption. Looking at the assumptions again, this time including the evidence, we find:

- IPV always escalates—offenders may begin with emotional and verbal abuse but will eventually escalate to physical attacks and severe abusive violent behavior. Stated another way: Batterers do not desist on their own.

There is no evidence that supports this claim, unless one draws only on data collected from women who seek shelter for severe cases of battering. For these women, violence did escalate until the point at which the women feared for their own safety and that of their children. However, data gathered from nonclinical or nonshelter samples indicate that, while violence does escalate in some couples, it desists in other couples. In fact, Feld and Straus (1990) report that data from the 1985 National Family Violence Resurvey reveal that 33% of the most frequent offenders of severe violence, and 10% of those who perpetrate minor violence, desist over time. A recent review of the literature reveals that male batterers can be classified into three categories—low-, moderate-, and high-risk offenders (Cavanaugh & Gelles, 2005). These three types of offenders can be further subtyped according to the dimensions of severity and frequency of violence, criminal history, and level of psychopathology. These specific characteristics, particular to both the type of offender and the individual within that type, create a threshold at which the offender either will or will not escalate in violence. This is not to say that this threshold can never be crossed, only that it

is unlikely that an offender will move from one particular type to another. This observation refutes previous claims among researchers and advocates that battering always escalates in frequency and intensity over time.

- Only men are violent in abusive families.

According to recent estimates, in 2002, there were 1,202 female and 388 male intimate partner homicides (U.S. Department of Justice, 2002). Women do suffer more serious and sometimes deadly injuries. However, there is considerable research that demonstrates that the rate of violence initiated by women against intimate partners is about the same as the rate of male-initiated intimate violence (Straus, 2005). There are many, and possibly more, couples where the female partner is the only one to use physical violence as there are couples where the male partner is the only one to use violence (Straus & Ramirez, 2004); women initiate acts of intimate violence as often as men (Straus, 2005); and male and female partner violence is overwhelmingly utilized as a method of coercive control (Fiebert & Gonzales, 1997; Medeiros & Straus, 2006). While men may inflict more severe injuries, it is categorically incorrect to conceptualize IPV as solely male-to-female violence.

- Arrest is an effective intervention and does bring about a cessation of violence.

This assumption is based on the results of the Minneapolis Police Experiment (Sherman & Berk, 1984). This study was designed to examine whether arresting men for violent attacks against their partners would decrease the risk of further violence. Those households receiving the arrest intervention had the lowest rate (10 percent) of recidivism (relapse into violent behavior) and those who were separated had the highest (24 percent). However, replications of the Minneapolis study found that, contrary to the evidence from Minneapolis, arrest had no more effect in deterring future arrests or complaints of violence than did separation or counseling (Berk, Campbell, Klap, & Western, 1992; Dunford, Huizinga, & Elliott, 1990; Pate & Hamilton, 1992; Sherman & Smith, 1992). The replications did find that men who were employed when they were arrested were less likely to be violent after arrested compared to men who were not arrested. However, men who were unemployed when they were arrested were actually more likely to be violent after they were arrested compared to unemployed men who were not arrested. Thus, while arrest can be effective, it can, under certain circumstances, create higher levels of danger for victims.

- Batterers intervention programs that employ the Duluth model are effective.

There appears to be little empirical support that batterer intervention programs are effective over time in decreasing acts of violence in intimate relationships (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004). While the Duluth model of batterers intervention has been widely discussed and implemented, there is no evidence to support that it is more effective than other models in treating men who batter. Even for those programs that report some success (i.e., the cessation of violence), they are uneven, at best, as to their effectiveness. This may be explained by a number of factors regarding the program: modality, philosophy, structure, number of sessions, facilitator, participant's motivation to change, and/or measurement issues, to name only a few. The lack of uniformity of these variables across programs makes it difficult to assess effectiveness. Without standard measurement, it is impossible to pinpoint whether a particular program is effective or not.

- Couples counseling *is never* appropriate in cases of IPV.

There is a general bias against couples counseling as an intervention in cases of IPV. The bias is based on the understanding that a basic tenet of couples counseling is that problems are a function of the family system and cannot be caused by the acts of one member of the dyad. Such an assumption is directly contrary to the theoretical model that explains violence as a function of male societal privilege and males' use of coercive control. Moreover, it is feared that couples counseling may lead to blaming the victim—that is, the woman (Bograd, 1988). Many practitioners have stated flatly that couples counseling is counterindicated as a treatment for IPV (Eisenstat & Bancroft, 1999). Maiuro, Hagar, Lin, and Olson (2001) obtained data from 30 states that had implemented standards for batterers treatment program and found that 42% of the states specifically preclude couples counseling as a treatment of perpetrators or offenders.

Despite the conventional view and implemented standards that claim that couples counseling is counterindicated as an intervention for domestic violence, there is no evidence to support the claim that violence is exacerbated or danger increased for women who enter couples counseling with their abusive partners. There is some evidence that couples counseling could be helpful for certain couples under specific circumstances (Dunford, 1997; O'Leary, 1996).

ADVOCACY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE: CONSISTENCIES AND CONTRADICTIONS

Advocates and social scientists often share the same goals with regard to social problems and social justice. Both seek to bring IPV out from behind closed doors, place the issue on the policy agenda, and seek to provide aid and protection for oppressed victims of violence and abuse. However, when advocates and social scientists are in the same room or on the same podium, they oftentimes do not share the same means or rules and their interactions take on a TEGWAR aura.

ADVOCACY GOALS

Given that I classify myself as a researcher, it may be inappropriate for me to authoritatively state what the goals of advocacy are. However, I do consider myself an advocate and offer the following observations.

One of the first and most important goals of advocacy is to work to transform a private trouble into a social issue and ultimately a social problem. Changing public opinions and attitudes is challenging and time consuming. However, should an issue become a social problem and public policy issue, the next most important goal is to mobilize efforts to identify, address, and change the structures causing the social problem. Concurrent with such mobilization efforts, advocates recognize that it is equally important to focus on those oppressed or victimized by the social problem. Those who are oppressed or victimized have, in fact, been doubly victimized—first by the selective inattention to the problem and victim blaming and second by the actual oppression or injury caused by the problem. Given a choice, most advocates appear to be willing to overlook the offender or cause of the problem in order to muster resources and programs to provide treatment and/or relief for victims or those who are oppressed.

Advocacy efforts are often governed by the ends justifying the means. Many advocates have little patience with the timetable of research or social policy—they see the harm inflicted at ground level and strongly feel the need to do something.

SOCIAL SCIENCE GOALS

The goals of social science are more pedestrian, but no less important when it comes to policy and practice. Social science, like any science, has the goal of explaining, predicting, and understanding a particular phenomenon. Toward that end, social scientists employ the scientific method. There is insufficient room in this article to illustrate the scientific method. What is important to point out is that there are rules regarding the interpretation and generalization of social science data and evidence—what social scientists refer to as rules of evidence. The rules apply to all stages of the scientific enterprise, from sampling, to measurement, to data analysis, and ultimately, to interpretation and generalization of findings. A final and crucially important aspect of social science goals is to build theory. In other words, explanation requires theory. Theories must be testable and tested. Ex post facto interpretations of data are not tests of theory. To be testable, theories have to be falsifiable. That is one of the underlying flaws of the pro-feminist patriarchal model of IPV. The pro-feminist theory is difficult to test, because to date there are no known cultures that are not patriarchal. Because there is no variation in the explanatory variable, a theory that explains IPV as a function of patriarchy cannot be tested. That is not to say that a theory that draws on patriarchy could not be tested. For example, variations in male power and privilege exist across cultures and subcultures and it could be that as male power varies so too do the rates of IPV.

Finally, social science goals include the ability to replicate findings. Had the Minneapolis Police Experiment not been replicated, we would never have learned that arrest for misdemeanor violence was not a successful deterrent and that arrest could, in some class of cases, cause violence to escalate.

CONCLUSIONS

In the course of testifying in a class-action suit on the topic of domestic violence, I encountered, in the space of 2 hours, two fundamental misuses of research. First, expert testimony was introduced that included the factoid that domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women between the ages of 15 and 44 in the United States—more than car accidents, muggings, and rapes combined. In and of itself, this testimony had no bearing on the outcome of the case. However, it strongly suggested that the expert was bringing advocacy evidence and not research expertise into the courtroom. Second, there was testimony that, because three women who were victims of domestic violence had their children removed by child welfare workers, this meant that the child welfare agency was depriving women of their constitutional liberty interests to raise their children free from unwarranted government intervention. While it was probably accurate to state that, in the cases of the three women, child welfare workers removed children from their homes solely because their mothers had been victims of domestic violence, it was also true that there was no scientific evidence that children were systematically being removed from victims of domestic violence. While the three named plaintiffs were entitled to justice, there was no social science evidence that would support judicial intervention into the city's child welfare system.

I have seen advocacy evidence introduced in criminal cases as well as divorce and child custody cases. I cringe every time I hear this, as I know it compromises the ability of the finder of fact to actually find the facts and make an evidence-informed ruling. It is my hope that in the next stage of development of the field of IPV (and child maltreatment), a firewall is built between advocacy statistics and social science evidence and that the courts are both willing and able to draw only on the latter to render judicial findings.

NOTES

1. There never was, and has never been, an actual research study that supported the claim for higher numbers of domestic violence incidents on Super Bowl Sunday or the days thereafter.

2. For examples of the use of these facts see the following Web sites: <http://www.in-map.net/counties/STJOSEPH/GOVERNMENT/Stjoesherriff/domestic.html>; http://www.lapdonline.org/prevent_crime/content_basic_view/8862; <http://www.thomastonpolice.com/thomaston-police-department-get-informedj.cfm>; <http://216.239.51.104/search?q=cache:KSgJHqdXRbMJ:http://www.selegal.org/Benchbook2003.doc+%E2%80%A2+Sixty-three+percent+of+young+men+between+the+ages+of+11+and+20+who+are+servicing+time+for+homicide+have+killed+the+mother%E2%80%99s+abuser.&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=7>.

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