

Jan 29 2005

by The Register-Guard Staff

It's one thing to ask couples how often their arguments escalate to physical attack. It's another to actually watch them go at it.

Deborah Capaldi has.

A senior scientist at Eugene's Oregon Social Learning Center, Capaldi has spent hours watching young couples tackle problem-solving exercises in the center's lab assessment rooms. To the surprise of Capaldi and her colleagues, a partner would sometimes lash out in the midst of debating how to solve the problem.

Who were the primary initiators of such slaps, pokes and kicks? "The women," Capaldi says.

Capaldi's and her co-workers' research, slated for publication in the Journal of Family Violence found that women age 18 were more than four times as likely as men to initiate physical aggression. The gap closed by age 26, when women were only slightly more likely than men to tee off.

The counterintuitive findings are among a growing body of research suggesting that women may play a larger role in domestic violence than commonly assumed. But the research is also controversial and subject to interpretation.

Capaldi contends that prevention and treatment programs for battered women often miss the mark because they fail to consider the realities of female aggression.

Women need to know, for example, that if they assault their partner, they run a higher risk of severe injury themselves, she said.

“Women engage in aggression,” she said, “and we’re not doing them any favors by denying they have any part in it.”

Most advocates for female victims of domestic violence acknowledge that some women are aggressors and some men are victims. But they caution that the dynamics are often very different, the options for escape much narrower, and the risk of physical injury or death far greater for women.

“The most common cause of injury for women between the ages of 15 and 44 is domestic violence – you don’t see that for men,” said Margo Schaefer, community outreach director at Womenspace, a Eugene shelter and support group for battered women.

“What it’s like to be a battered man is not well-known, and it’s important to reach out to those men,” Schaefer said. “But with women, we have an epidemic on our hands.”

The most crucial distinction between male and female aggressors, say Schaefer and other advocates for battered women, is this: Women are more likely to use force as a way to focus attention on unmet needs and frustrations, while men are more likely to use it as a fear and control tactic.

Because of the disparity in physical size and strength, women often end up battered by men regardless of whether they resist or comply, Schaefer said. As for the potential of greater injury should they strike first, “no one needs to tell a battered woman that if she mixes it up with a batterer, she’s going to get the worst of it.”

According to federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, about one in three female murder victims in this country is killed by an “intimate” – a spouse, ex-spouse or boyfriend. The rate is actually down somewhat today compared with the 1980s and ‘90s.

Only 3 percent to 4 percent of male murder victims, meanwhile, are killed by an intimate. The raw number of men murdered by intimates dropped 71 percent from 1976 to 2002, the bureau reports.

In Oregon, a five-year Intimate Partner Violence Project study completed by the state last year found women were three times more likely than men to be assaulted by a partner, and four times more likely to be killed. One in 10 women in Oregon ages 20 to 55 had experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in the previous five years, the study found.

More than 100 academic studies, however, suggest that men and women assault their partners at about equal rates. Male victims typically fail to gain much attention, advocates say, because of strong cultural biases that men are expected to take abuse “like a man” and not complain, and because many men are too embarrassed to admit abuse.

There's also the notion that political correctness – in which only women go to shelters, and only men go to treatment programs – may be at play. “People have put a great deal of energy into establishing those shelters and treatment programs – the status quo,” Capaldi said. “It's become an industry.”

Seeing is believing?

Capaldi, a researcher at Oregon Social Learning Center since 1983, said her work on female aggression came about by accident. She's devoted much of her career to the Oregon Youth Study, a two-decade assessment of more than 200 males from mostly lower-income homes.

The males were first interviewed as fourth-graders and have been visited annually ever since; they are now in their late 20s. As they entered their late teens, most had acquired girlfriends or wives, and Capaldi and associates expanded their research to include a couples study.

A large majority of the couples aren't involved in any physical violence, Capaldi stressed. In most studies on the topic, she said, between one-quarter and one-third of men and women admit to having physically struck a partner at least once in the previous year.

In a 2001 study of her own, Capaldi reported frequent levels of physical aggression by both the male and female in 8 percent of interviewed couples, by just the woman in 5 percent of the couples, and by just the man in 1 percent of the couples.

Among 86 percent of the couples, neither the man nor woman committed frequent aggression.

Capaldi's latest study, however, is different in that it focuses on observed rather than reported acts of aggression. Capaldi said she and her colleagues expected some verbal arguments but were surprised by the extent of slaps, pokes and kicks as partners discussed such assigned topics as planning a party, where to go on a date, or how to deal with such issues as jealousy and lack of money.

If hit or poked, the men and women were about equally as likely to respond in kind. None of the physical aggression was severe, which researchers would have halted, Capaldi said.

Some women may initiate aggression because they see it as a kind of innocent horseplay and as a way to connect in a sexually intimate relationship, Capaldi said. Younger women, especially, may be less sure of how to relate, and more susceptible to jealousy because they are unsure of the relationship's staying power, she said.

Depression is another potential factor, with some people choosing to cope aggressively rather than passively, she said.

Many partners seemed to engage in the slaps and pokes without even consciously thinking about it, Capaldi said. "It was almost like a way of communicating," she said.

Two-way aggression

Teri Gutierrez, director of Non-Violent Alternatives, a batterer intervention program in Springfield, has her own theory about why many young women may take the initiative in physical aggression.

“What I see with younger women is, they don’t want to be seen as a victim, and so they put on this tough persona,” Gutierrez said. “But when it comes down to who’s really in control, that’s a harder thing to assess. It may look like a woman is being bossy or emotionally abusive, but that does not necessarily mean she’s the primary aggressor.”

Gutierrez said many male batterers are skilled at manipulating a partner and getting her to hit first in order to blame her. Many men, she said, are also skilled at being on their best behavior when they know they’re being observed – in a laboratory setting, for example.

While some women are the sole aggressor, mutual aggression is more common, Gutierrez said. Some women who suffer physical abuse think they “deserve” it because of their own aggressive actions.

Gutierrez recalled two women served by her agency who became agitated whenever it was suggested they might be the victim in their relationships. “They really believed that if they weren’t abusive, he wouldn’t have been abusive to them,” Gutierrez said. “They thought their behavior was so egregious, who wouldn’t have hit them back?”

It's not as if Gutierrez's agency called NOVA for short, hasn't tried to address the problem of female aggression: The agency sponsored a female "primary aggressor" program in 2000 and again last year, but struggled both times to find enough willing participants to justify the effort.

A "female aggression wheel" used in the program lists the various ways some women will abuse a male partner – from spitting, pulling hair and throwing objects to such psychological devices as "crying to make him feel guilty" or "trying to make him jealous."

Many women are reluctant to admit their culpability in a culture that views aggressive females as less acceptable than aggressive males, Gutierrez said.

"You hear of a woman being violent, it's shocking to people and viewed as aberrant behavior that should be punished," she said. "There's maybe less empathy for a woman who's aggressive or mouthy or addicted or cheating. Men get battered, too"

When a man tells her he is a victim of domestic violence, Gutierrez said she asks two questions: How does he benefit from staying in the relationship, and what's preventing him from leaving? The point, she said, is that most men have fewer barriers – such as insufficient finances or primary child care duties – blocking them.

Female aggressors differ from male aggressors in several ways. For one, women are more likely to see their aggression as a problem that needs fixing, Gutierrez said.

Schaefer, at Womenspace, identifies another difference: Women who batter men rarely pursue contact after separation, while men are much more likely to stalk or harass a past partner.

Despite the differences, it's important to remember that anyone can be a victim of domestic violence, Schaefer said. The idea that men are somehow immune to physical assault or isolation or ridicule is ludicrous, she said.

“A lot of women abuse men by telling them they’re not man enough – “Look, you won’t even hit back when I hit you,” Schaefer said. “If you’re a man who’s not going to hit back, then a very positive thing about you can be turned into a source of ridicule against you.”

Womenspace does not offer support groups for male victims, but otherwise provides the same services, including emergency shelter, to battered men and women. Male victims are directed to hotels or other safe havens, distinct from the confidential emergency shelter made available to women.

When someone reminds her that “men get battered, too,” Schaefer said her immediate response is to agree.

“It’s an underserved population,” she said. “Pretty much everyone is underserved when it comes to domestic violence.”

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