



Gender differences in perceptions of domestic violence¹

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Tell me how you think, and I'll understand what's going on ...

There are many complex and fascinating questions about the potential links between behaviour and perceptions. One of the topics that interests researchers is the relationship between the behaviour involved in domestic violence and the perception of violence on the part of both perpetrators and victims. This information sheet summarizes some of the results of an innovative research program carried out in Quebec that investigated the ways women and men perceive domestic violence.

Purpose

The aim of the research was to increase understanding of the ways that women and men recognize, define, tolerate, and explain domestic violence in relation to their past experience with it.

Participants

The research involved three groups of men and women, each drawn from a sample of people who had reported different experiences with domestic violence. A total of 83 men and 98 women took part in the study.

The male groups consisted of:

1. Men who were recent perpetrators of physical abuse, and who were receiving therapy designed to reduce violent behaviour.
2. Men who had been physical abusers in the past, who had received therapy and who were no longer physically abusive.

3. Men drawn from the general population who had not been reported for physically abusive behaviour.

The female groups consisted of:

1. Women who were recent victims of physical abuse, who were living in shelters and receiving counselling.
2. Women who had experienced physical abuse and had lived in shelters in the past, but who were no longer living in shelters and were no longer experiencing physical abuse.
3. Women drawn from the general population who had never lived in shelters.

Procedures

Researchers compared perceptions of spousal violence using reliable questionnaires and a new audiovisual tool, *Évaluation de la violence par modalité audiovisuelle* (ÉVA) (which translates as audiovisual violence assessment).²

ÉVA is two-part audiovisual instrument used to observe how men and women identify and access the severity of violent behaviour. The first part, a **recognition** component, consists of six short films. Each film shows actors in a situation where a husband and wife are in conflict. Participants are asked to identify violent behaviours, and classify the type of abuse it represents (physical or psychological abuse). A high ÉVA recognition score indicates good recognition of violent behaviour. The second part, a **severity** component, consists of 36 film clips showing violent or non-violent behaviour. Participants

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is known by many names, including intimate partner abuse, wife beating, battering, marital abuse, and partner abuse. It is not any single behaviour but rather a pattern of many physical, sexual, and/or psychological behaviours perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner.³

For this study, domestic violence was classified as either physical violence, in which physical harm is done to a partner, or psychological violence. Psychological violence was subclassified into two types:

- emotional violence, in which a partner denigrates, blames or hurts the other partner emotionally.
- domination, in which a partner exerts a negative influence on the spouse to achieve compliance or dependence, or isolates the spouse from family members and community.

are asked to rate the severity of the behaviour on a scale of 1 to 6. The higher the ÉVA severity score, the more severely the participant rates the observed behaviour.

Participants were asked to recognize a variety of types of violent behaviour in domestic settings. They were shown scenes that enacted 10 situations of physical domestic violence and 20 situations of psychological violence, 10 of which were emotionally violent and 10 of which were abusive forms of domination.

How did women perceive domestic violence?

Past research indicates that women with a high probability of being in, and staying in, a relationship with a violent spouse have a tolerant attitude towards violence, low self-esteem, traditional ideas about sex roles, intense commitment, and excessive attachment. These factors are also associated with a high risk of ending up alone and poor.⁴

The findings of this study corroborated some of these factors, in that:

- all women in the study recognized behaviour associated with physical violence more easily than behaviour associated with psychological abuse;
- physical violence was rated more severely than forms of domination, which in turn were rated more severely than emotional violence;
- women who were recent victims of domestic violence, and were living in shelters, were less harsh in their assessments of physically violent behaviour (i.e., more tolerant of physical abuse) than were women who had experienced domestic violence in the past but were no longer experiencing it; and,

- women who were recent victims of domestic violence, and were living in shelters, generally rated emotional abuse less severely than women who had experienced domestic violence in the past but were no longer experiencing it.

A troubling phenomenon was noted among some of the women who had spent time in shelters due to abuse and were still in abusive relationships. Some of these women did not seem to be aware that living

Concepts used in perceptions of violence

People draw on preconceived conceptualizations of violence to judge the severity of violent behaviour. A narrow conception of violence might be, for example, thinking that it's all right to tell a child that you'd "like to be rid of her," because "it's only words." People with a narrow conception of violence may be unable or unwilling to recognize statements such as this one to be emotionally abusive.

A person's attitude towards violence is related to his or her degree of tolerance of violent behaviour. Someone with a tolerant attitude towards violence might, for example, think "a good slap on the rear end never hurt anyone."

Attribution of intent refers to ways that people explain to themselves the causes of their own behaviour, the behaviour of others, or outside events. In domestic violence situations, the perpetrator often blames someone else. For example, a perpetrator of violence might think that his wife "deliberately pushed him to the limit," or that a child "deserved a shaking," thereby attributing intent to the victims by which he feels he can exonerate his own behaviour and blame the victims for the violence.

with domestic violence was impacting them negatively. Although they generally acknowledged the risks associated with going back to live with a violent husband, they had difficulty in seeing the risks as applicable to themselves.

How did men perceive domestic violence?

Previous research has shown that cognitive therapy can be very effective in reducing violent behaviour in men. Violent men will characteristically minimize the seriousness of violent behaviour by tolerating it, legitimizing it, finding excuses for it, or blaming their spouses for it. The most effective therapeutic approaches emphasize men learning to:

- recognize various physical and psychological forms of violence;
- identify violent behaviour in themselves;
- recognize that violence is an abuse of power and an instrument of control;
- decrease their own abusive behaviour;
- take responsibility for violent behaviour;
- learn alternatives to violence, such as better communication skills;
- develop respect for spouses; and,
- develop a variety of social skills.

Past research has also found that violent men who complete a course of cognitive therapy are less likely to re-offend than violent men who are not given treatment.⁵ The findings of this study generally support this conclusion.

In this study, a sample of men who had been violent in the past were given cognitive therapy as part of the rehabilitation process. This group was compared to a group of men from the general population who

had never been violent and another group of men who were recent perpetrators of domestic violence. Analysis of the perceptions of the three groups of men showed that:

- overall, the men recognized behaviour associated with physical violence more easily than behaviour associated with psychological abuse;
- men rated physical violence more severely than forms of domination, and rated forms of domination more severely than other forms of psychological abuse;
- the formerly violent men who had completed therapy for domestic violence were generally better at identifying violent behaviour than the violent men who were just starting therapy and the men from the general population;
- the formerly violent men who had completed therapy recognized emotional abuse more than the other groups of men and all the groups of women;
- the formerly violent men who had completed therapy rated all the types of abusive behaviour shown on the test instrument video more severely than the other groups of men;
- the formerly violent men who had completed therapy identified psychological abuse more readily than the sample of violent men who were just starting therapy and the sample of men from the general population; and,
- in the sample of violent men who were just starting therapy, the more physically violent the men were, the less they identified violent behaviour, and the less severely they rated the behaviours they did identify.

Psychological abuse: Overlooked, but dangerous

When people think about domestic violence, they often think of physical abuse. However, physical violence is generally preceded by very destructive forms of psychological abuse which demean, denigrate, blame or hurt the feelings of the other person. Psychological abuse also includes dominating behaviour in which the perpetrator tries to control the spouse or isolate him or her from family and friends.

A number of researchers have argued that the impact of psychological abuse may be more serious than that of physical violence.⁶ For men, it destroys, hurts, injures, discourages, instils doubt, and leads to suicide. For women, it affects their innermost identity and undermines their self-esteem.

Researchers have less general agreement on what constitutes psychological abuse than on what constitutes physical abuse. Generally speaking, both women and men report experiencing and committing more emotional abuse than physical abuse.

Physical abuse more readily identified than psychological abuse in both genders

Further results of the study showed that both genders shared similar perceptions of physical abuse in that:

- physical abuse was the form of violence most often identified by both men and women, and
- both men and women considered physical abuse to be more violent than psychological abuse.

The genders differed in their rating of psychological abuse, however, with women rating it more severely than men.

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- 1 This information sheet is based on: Chamberland, C., Fortin, A., Turgeon, J., Laporte, L., & Léveillé, S. (2003). *Les cognitions familiales et la violence faite aux femmes et aux enfants*. Montreal, Quebec: Institut de recherche pour le développement sociale des jeunes.
 - 2 Turgeon, J., & Chamberland, C. (1994). *Six scènes de la vie conjugale*. Montreal: University of Montreal audiovisual department.
 - 3 Rodriguez, M. A., Bauer, H.M., McLoughlin, E. & Grumbach, K. (1999). Screening and intervention for intimate partner abuse. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 282, 468–474.
 - 4 Damant, D., Paquet, J., Bélanger, J.A., Dubé, M. (2001). *Le processus d'empowerment des femmes victimes de violence conjugale à travers le système judiciaire*. Montreal, Quebec: CRI-VIFF, Collection Études et Analyses, no. 14.
 - 5 Rondeau, G., Brochu, G., Lemire, L., & Brodeur, N. (1994). *La persévérance des conjoints violents dans les programmes de traitement qui leur sont proposés*. Research report. Montreal, Quebec: University of Montreal.
 - 6 Ouellet, F., & Clément, M. (1996). *Violence dans les relations affectives: Représentations et interventions*. Proceedings of the 63rd conference of the Association canadienne-française pour l'avancement des sciences, Montreal.

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Suggested citation: Chamberland, C., Léveillé, S. & Baraldi, R. (2006). *Gender differences in perceptions of domestic violence*. CECW information sheet #44E. Montreal, QC, Canada: University of Montreal, School of Social Work.

CECW information sheets are produced and distributed by the Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare to provide timely access to Canadian child welfare research.

The Centre of Excellence for Child Welfare (CECW) is one of the Centres of Excellence for Children's Well-Being funded by Health Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the official policy of the CECW's funders.

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