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Targets of Partner Violence

The Importance of Understanding Coping Trajectories

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Partner violence causes many negative outcomes for the target of the violence. Preventing negative outcomes in part hinges on altogether preventing the violence from occurring. There have been advances in violence prevention that the authors briefly review. However, some of the most notable advances focus on dealing with partner violence once it occurs. We now have a better understanding of different types of violence, and this has led to better interventions for perpetrators. But preventing the negative consequences of partner violence involves more than ending the violence itself; it also involves helping the targets of violence heal. The authors propose that the next decade of research on partner violence should focus on developing precise models of target coping and appropriate interventions for targets. The authors describe key variables that characterize the coping process but highlight limitations in knowledge of how these variables are related. The authors also outline several benefits of focusing on helping targets.

Keywords: partner violence; abuse; victim; coping

Partner violence causes many negative physical and psychological problems (Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, Bates, & Sandin, 1997; Sharps & Campbell, 1999). For the target of partner violence, some of these problems are short-lived (e.g., minor physical injuries), whereas others are profound and long lasting (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]), even tragic (i.e., death). How do we prevent such negative consequences from occurring? One strategy is to prevent partner violence altogether, which preempts the need to deal with its negative consequences. But it is unlikely that we will ever completely eradicate partner violence, so we must identify ways to stop perpetrators from continuing their violence and help the targets of violence heal.
What have we learned in the past 20 years to prevent the negative consequences of partner violence? Although there have been advances in preventing partner violence, the ultimate success of all prevention and intervention efforts rests on having a sound understanding of partner violence. We believe that the biggest advances have come from an increased understanding of partner violence and specifically the recognition of different forms of partner violence. Such distinctions stand to deepen our understanding of perpetrators, but do they improve interventions for targets of violence? We propose that a major priority in the next 10 years should be to identify precise models of target responses that suggest appropriate interventions, and we outline several benefits of focusing on targets.

PREVENTING PARTNER VIOLENCE

A major advance in preventing partner violence has been to focus on adolescents (cf. Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). The first episode of violence by a dating partner typically occurs by age 15 (Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983), which makes it important to inoculate adolescents against dating violence. Overall, the findings are encouraging. Adolescent programs typically occur in schools and vary in length and format (e.g., educational videos, classroom discussions, guidance on appropriate relationship behaviors). Such programs have improved knowledge concerning dating aggression, attitudes, and behavioral intentions, as measured in follow-up sessions. One experimental study (Foshee et al., 2004) examined the long-term effects of a prevention program. After 4 years, participants in the prevention condition reported significantly less physical and sexual dating violence perpetration and victimization than those in a control group. Despite such positive results, more research is needed to replicate these findings, using experimental designs with measures of long-term effects and with data from partners to verify participants’ own reports. We also need to develop ways of targeting adult populations.

MAJOR ADVANCES IN STOPPING PARTNER VIOLENCE

Arguably the most significant theoretical development in research on partner violence over the past two decades has been to advance our general understanding of the nature of partner violence and our specific understanding of perpetrators. There is mounting evidence to suggest that less severe
versus more severe physical abuse reflects different phenomena (O’Leary, 1993), with different causes and treatments (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000).

One form of partner violence involves perpetrators—mostly (but not exclusively) male—who use any means possible to exert coercive control over their partners. Occasional or frequent severe beatings serve to maintain fear and terror in the victim, and psychological forms of coercive control serve to keep the victim isolated, economically dependent, and emotionally distraught. These highly aggressive perpetrators frequently become more violent over time and exhibit other problem behaviors, such as personality disorders and/or drug dependencies. Johnson and Ferraro (2000) labeled this violence “intimate terrorism.” The cause is presumed to be a need to be dominant and to exercise power over another, fueled by a strong sense of patriarchal rights. Other cases of violence—labeled by Johnson and Ferraro as “common couple violence”—typically occur in the context of a heated argument, in which one or both partners lash out physically at the other; these cases are isolated occurrences, less severe, and do not reflect a general pattern of control. This violence is presumed to be caused by high levels of couple distress combined with a lack of effective conflict-resolution skills. Moreover, clinical psychologists have provided ample evidence that even perpetrators of intimate terrorism may vary in meaningful ways. Some perpetrators may exhibit extreme emotional dependence on their partners, whereas other perpetrators may exhibit general antisocial tendencies (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000; Saunders, 1992).

These theoretical developments are significant because they suggest appropriate interventions for ending violence (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000; O’Leary, 1993; Saunders, 1996), which stands to improve the less than impressive success rates of past interventions (Rosenfeld, 1992). For example, couples therapy might work to eliminate cases of common couple violence, but it would be an inappropriate intervention for perpetrators of intimate terrorism. Interventions for intimate terrorism will need to take into account the specific characteristics of the perpetrator (e.g., does the perpetrator possess general antisocial tendencies or symptoms of borderline personality disorder or both?). Unfortunately, not all perpetrators, particularly those with personality disorders, are good candidates for psychological treatments (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000); ending the negative consequences of violence may require more drastic interventions (e.g., incarceration) to ensure that the perpetrator does not have access to the target. Here, too, there has been excellent work to identify factors that influence the success of legal interventions, such as the conditions under which restraining orders are effective (e.g., Holt, Kernic, Lumley, Wolf, & Rivara, 2002).
In summary, distinctions among different types of partner violence and perpetrators have been useful in suggesting appropriate interventions for perpetrators. However, preventing the negative consequences of violence is not limited to ending the violence itself. It also involves helping the targets of violence heal. Although we have made advances in knowing how to stop perpetrators (e.g., treatment, incarceration), we have not made comparable advances in knowing how to help targets heal. This is a pressing issue that we need to address.

WHAT ABOUT TARGETS OF PARTNER VIOLENCE?

Much of the literature on coping with partner violence focuses on intimate terrorism (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Often, it is assumed that the most effective intervention for a target is to provide assistance in leaving the violent relationship. But this overlooks the reality that not all targets are emotionally ready to leave their violent partners (Strube, 1988). The extant literature suggests that battered women who do not intend to leave their partners exhibit many of the following responses: (a) adopting illusions about the partner, such as the beliefs that they are responsible for “helping” the partner, they can control their partner’s violent outbursts, or the violence will not occur again; (b) denying that the partner’s behavior constitutes violence (e.g., by claiming that the partner was just “joking around”) or minimizing the extent of physical or emotional injury suffered; (c) blaming the violence on causes beyond the partner’s control (e.g., blaming oneself or a partner’s addiction problem) or denying the partner’s intent to harm them; and (d) becoming increasingly isolated to avoid shame over being abused (Arriaga, 2002; Dunham & Senn, 2000; Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1997; Kirkwood, 1993; Rosen, 1996). Among women who want to leave, economic dependence and residual emotional ties are major obstacles to leaving and keep women in a “committed” but unhappy state (Arriaga, 2002; Rusbult & Martz, 1995).

The challenge is to understand how the responses just described—psychological distress, emotional commitment, and economic dependence—go together in a more general process of coping. Is there an identifiable sequence of responses that characterizes coping with partner violence? Some of the best information on coping processes comes from qualitative studies (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Kirkwood, 1993; Landenburger, 1989; Mills, 1985). Piecing together accounts from these studies suggests a general coping process: Initially targets experience a sense of betrayal over the unexpected violence. Thereafter, targets try to keep the partner happy so as to avoid an outburst, and simultaneously, they exhibit one or more of the responses outlined in the previous paragraph. In many cases, something trig-
gers a change in the way the target sees the relationship, what might be described as a “major event” that coincides with a shift in perceptions of the violence. (Major events can include many things, such as a sudden increase in the severity of violence or the onset of violence against children.) Following major events, targets label themselves as “abused” and form intentions to leave. Targets may leave several times, becoming more detached from the partner each time, until they garner the emotional and financial resources to leave permanently.

Although this is a plausible description of coping with partner violence, this description provides only a starting point to gaining a deeper understanding. Does this description capture everyone, or are there different trajectories of coping? Not all targets report a major event, and not all report this sequence. Moreover, what is the role of psychological distress in the coping process?

Quantitative studies have advanced our understanding of coping, psychological distress, and intentions to leave. Targets who exhibit coping that is focused on reducing the negative emotions caused by violence (i.e., emotion-focused coping, such as avoiding the problem, accepting the situation as is, reinterpretting the violence to be less negative) are more likely to show signs of extreme psychological distress (i.e., PTSD) than are targets who exhibit signs of focusing on changing the situation (i.e., problem-solving coping; Arias & Pape, 1999; Coffey, Leitenberg, Henning, Bennett, & Jankowski, 1996). But it is unclear whether emotion-focused coping causes PTSD; it could be that severe violence causes both. So for targets who show signs of PTSD, is there anything to elicit less emotion-focused coping and more problem-focused coping?

Moreover, extreme psychological abuse is associated with intentions to leave only among targets who do not exhibit signs of PTSD (Arias & Pape, 1999). This is problematic because most targets of extreme psychological abuse are likely to exhibit signs of PTSD. Similarly, targets who feel trapped are more likely to downplay the partner’s violent behavior, a form of emotion-focused coping (Arriaga, 2002). So signs of PTSD, emotion-focused coping, and mixed or low intentions to leave go together, but exactly how? Downplaying the violence and other emotion-focused coping makes stopping the violence seem less urgent, and this may make targets more likely to endure additional psychological abuse that further weakens their ability to leave. For example, when a perpetrator convinces the target that she is to blame for the violence, she may feel more responsible and become more inclined to stick with the status quo. This further exposes her to dangerous conditions and messages—such as isolation from supportive others, increased economic dependence, and being told she will “never do better”—which further increases the barriers to leaving (Kirkwood, 1993). We need to
determine whether a strong emotional bond with the partner causes targets to reinterpret violence, whether an increased tendency to reinterpret violence causes targets to sustain strong emotional bonds, or whether both occur and under what conditions each occurs.

In summary, there have been some advances in understanding how targets cope with partner violence. But many questions remain about identifying specific coping trajectories, assessing the pervasiveness of each trajectory, and elaborating on the exact causal mechanisms that unfold over time in the coping process. Addressing these unresolved issues will have key implications for appropriate interventions, as described next.

SETTING THE AGENDA FOR HELPING TARGETS OF PARTNER VIOLENCE

Helping targets of intimate terrorism. Helping targets of partner violence is tricky work, because whether an intervention will be helpful will likely depend on where the target is in the coping process. If it is clear that a perpetrator is incapable of stopping the violence, most targets eventually recognize this fact, which is painful because of hopes dashed for a good life together. When targets paired with incurable partners reach this point, no longer downplaying or reinterpreting the violence, interventions might focus on providing resources to help the target attain self-sufficiency, such as counseling to cope with past abuse, social support to reduce isolation and loneliness, financial resources, and so forth. We need to support any and all efforts that help survivors of past violence attain self-sufficiency.1

Timing is everything, and not all targets of partner violence may welcome interventions to enhance self-sufficiency when the violence first occurs. Unfortunately, part of the control that a typical intimate terrorist exerts involves convincing his partner that even if she does not like the situation, she cannot leave—because the situation is not so bad, because she will never find a better situation, because she will suddenly realize deep inside that she needs him and at that point he will not take her back, because he has promised to change, and so forth. At the start of their relationship, the perpetrator must have had some qualities to attract her, and she may harbor hope that those qualities will prevail and that the violence will end. It should come as no surprise, then, that for a long period of time she may not be ready to leave, even if she is extremely unhappy. What type of intervention might be most appropriate for a target at this juncture?

If we are to put an end to the negative consequences of violence, we need to devote the next decade of research to developing theoretical models that
describe different phases of coping and predict when a target seeks self-sufficiency. We should take seriously Arias and Pape’s (1999) conclusion that interventions need to take into account the target’s psychological state (i.e., signs of PTSD and thought patterns that reflect emotion-focused coping) before assuming that she “wants” or “is willing” to leave (Arias & Pape, 1999, p. 64). Targets who are not ready to consider drastic changes to the relationship will likely benefit from interventions that focus directly on eliminating beliefs that reinterpret the partner’s behavior, reducing symptoms of psychological distress, and increasing self-esteem. Such interventions may have the effect of a “major event” as described above; as targets renew their sense of self, this may trigger less embellished, more negative perceptions of the partner’s behavior, which in turn may make the target emotionally ready to pursue self-sufficiency.

The best research efforts to identify trajectories toward self-sufficiency will be spent in two realms. One is in the lab using classic experimental methods to address whether (a) eliminating reinterpretations of partner violence reduces relationship commitment and increases self-esteem, (b) increasing self-esteem reduces reinterpretations of partner violence, and (c) manipulations can cause sustained reductions in PTSD symptomatology. Random assignment and manipulation are important but so is examining plausible target characteristics that reveal differences in the causal relationships (i.e., moderators).

The other realm involves sophisticated longitudinal analyses that capture ongoing trajectories toward self-sufficiency that occur naturally, without an intervention. Here, there are several guiding questions: Why do some targets experience a sudden or gradual shift in perceptions, whereas others do not? Among those who show a shift in perceptions, is there a catalyst major event that sets in motion a process of “spiraling out” of the relationship (Kirkwood, 1993)? Longitudinal methods allow one to search for major events or other catalysts that precede a shift in perceptions of the partner’s behavior and that are followed by changes in psychological well-being and relationship commitment. One goal would be to determine whether changing perceptions of the partner’s behavior is a sufficient condition for stopping the negative consequences for the target. Another goal would be to empirically capture individual, naturally occurring trajectories. This might best be achieved with cluster analysis, which affords an analysis of different constellations of variables that could reflect specific coping trajectories (cf. Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Henon, Rehman, & Stueur [2000] recent use of cluster analysis to suggest a typology of batterers). Once we better understand various causal processes in coping and develop models that capture different coping trajectories, the challenge becomes to assess how common each coping trajectory is among targets of intimate violence.
Helping targets of common couple violence. On one hand, there is reason to believe that targets of common couple violence cope differently than targets of intimate terrorism. If there are different causes, as suggested above, there are likely to be different consequences. Indeed, verbal abuse and low levels of physical abuse, as occur in common couple violence, are associated with better outcomes than is extreme psychological control (cf. Coker et al., 2002). The relatively low levels of psychological distress that likely occur from common couple violence may mean that these targets form intentions to leave sooner than do targets of intimate terrorism.

On the other hand, there may be similarities in coping. Although the outcomes of common couple violence are less severe, they are negative nonetheless (e.g., increased risk of divorce and acceptance of norms that make violence tolerable; Bradbury & Lawrence, 1999; Straus, 1999). As do targets of intimate terrorism, targets of common couple violence may downplay their partner’s acts, for example, by all together denying that there has been violence, instead claiming “only” hitting and pushing. Thus, all targets may downplay the violence. Also, all targets are likely to be unhappy with their relationships. But what causes the feeling of “we’re not happy but we’re together” to change to “I can’t stay in this relationship any longer”? Although both types of targets face emotional barriers to leaving the relationship, undoubtedly targets of intimate terrorism face additional barriers (such as fearing for their safety). Here, moderator analyses will become critical in assessing possible differences. Moderator analyses should also examine possible gender differences in coping, particularly in common couple violence in which men are frequently targets.

WHAT CAN BE GAINED FROM FOCUSING ON TARGETS OF PARTNER VIOLENCE?

An obvious reason for focusing on targets is that (as we have already stated) we stand to develop more appropriate target interventions. But there are other advantages as well. Such a focus stands to influence societal beliefs. The more people know about coping, the less they will blame the target. We often hear people ask, “Why doesn’t she leave? It’s her fault for staying.” Readers of this journal know that almost invariably, the answer is not “because there’s something wrong with her,” and there are many studies documenting (a) the obstacles targets invariably face and (b) the reality that most targets eventually do leave.

However, there are psychological mechanisms that lead people to persist in the belief that the target is responsible for ending the violent situation. One such mechanism involves believing that a target who cannot get the where-
withal to leave deserves what is coming (i.e., the belief in a just world; Lerner, 1980). Another mechanism involves, after learning about a violent incident, perceiving that violence was inevitable and the target should have seen it coming (i.e., the hindsight bias; Carli, 1999). The more we understand about coping and communicate our models to others, the more others are likely to see that the coping strategies of violence targets are, at worst, normal and expected and, at best, heroic. In other words, violence targets are people whose minds and hearts are managing impossible situations. Moreover, the more the public holds the perpetrator responsible for partner violence, the more the target will as well. It is hoped that understanding this fact will cause others to be supportive when a target needs help.

Yet another advantage of focusing on targets of partner violence is that we can improve our understanding of basic coping and relationship processes. For example, because partner violence seems so unthinkable (the person who presumably loves someone is physically hurting him or her), targets may cope with this contradiction in ways that differ from other stressors. Moreover, recent research on relationships suggests that relationship commitment is a positive force and that partners who idealize each other’s qualities bring about those very qualities. Partner violence presents a theoretical challenge: What are the specific conditions (situational, person specific, or otherwise) that make high commitment or positively biased beliefs dangerous?

We have outlined advances in preventing the negative consequences of partner violence, starting with preventing partner violence all together. Most notably, there have been major advances in dealing with partner violence once it occurs, namely in research that suggests specific treatments for specific types of perpetrators. However, preventing the negative consequences of partner violence involves more than treating perpetrators. It also involves providing appropriate resources for targets for whom the negative consequences do not instantly disappear. We have suggested that although there has been excellent initial work on targets, many questions remain that pose pressing issues for the next decade of research on violence. Understanding more about coping with partner violence stands to increase our understanding of basic theories, create a more supportive climate for targets, and most important, provide much needed help to targets.

NOTES

1. We wish to emphasize that we are not suggesting targets must leave their relationships. Leaving the relationship is often a last resort when there is clear evidence that the partner’s violence will persist. We use the term self-sufficiency as a way of suggesting that targets break from
the relationship as it currently stands but concede that leaving may not be best if the partner is capable of a nonviolent relationship.

2. We recognize that prospective methods are extremely difficult to implement but they are necessary in light of the documented inaccuracies of retrospective measures (cf. McFarland & Ross, 1987).

REFERENCES


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