

Guest Editorial: Intimate Partner Violence as a Global Problem – International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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Editorial (p. 197)

Focus Section:
**Focus: Intimate Partner
Violence**

► **Guest Editorial: Intimate Partner Violence as a Global Problem – International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives** Barbara Krahe / Antonia Abbey (pp. 198 – 202)

The Relation Between Dating Violence Victimization and Commitment Among Turkish College Women: Does the Investment Model Matter? Ezgi Toplu-Demirtas / Zeynep Hatipoğlu-Sümer / Jacquelyn W. White (pp. 203 – 215)

Women, Violence, and Social Change in Northern Ireland and Chiapas: Societies Between Tradition and Transition Melanie Hoewer (pp. 216 – 231)

Intimate Partner Violence Against Disabled Women as a Part of Widespread Victimization and Discrimination over the Lifetime: Evidence from a German Representative Study Monika Schröttle / Sandra Glammeier (pp. 232 – 248)

Perceptions of Gay, Lesbian, and Heterosexual Domestic Violence Among Undergraduates in Sweden Ali M. Ahmed / Lina Aldén / Mats Hammarstedt (pp. 249 – 260)

College Students' Perceptions of Intimate Partner Violence: A Comparative Study of Japan, China, and the United States Toan Thanh Nguyen / Yasuko Morinaga / Irene Hanson Frieze / Jessica Cheng / Manyu Li / Akiko Doi / Tatsuya Hirai / Eunsun Joo / Cha Li (pp. 261 – 273)

Self-efficacy in Anger Management and Dating Aggression in Italian Young Adults Annalaura Nocentini / Concetta Pastorelli / Ersilia Menesini (pp. 274 – 285)

Open Section

Reactions to Provocation and Feelings About Aggression in an Indian sample VanLal Thanzami / John Archer (pp. 286 – 297)

Transitional Justice and the Quality of Democracy Anja Mihr (pp. 298 – 313)



Guest Editorial: Intimate Partner Violence as a Global Problem – International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives

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This editorial introduces the Focus Section on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) as a worldwide problem, which brings together six papers that are truly international and interdisciplinary. They provide insights into IPV from nine different cultures – China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Northern Ireland, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States – from scholars in the fields of psychology, gender studies, political science, and economics. The first three papers look at how widespread the experience of IPV is among different groups of women, examine selected risk factors associated with heightened vulnerability to victimization, and discuss consequences of intimate partner victimization. Another two papers place the problem of IPV in the wider context of societal perceptions and attitudes about victims and perpetrators of IPV in different countries, whereas the last paper examines the role of individual differences in the management of emotions in the escalation or de-escalation of relationship conflict. In combination, the papers highlight the interplay between the macro level of social and cultural norms condoning the use of violence, the micro level of family relations and construction of couple relationships, and the individual level of attitudes and behaviors that precipitate IPV.

1. Background

Violence in intimate relationships is a worldwide problem that poses a severe threat to victims' health and well-being and incurs high costs to societies as a whole. Intimate partner violence (IPV) refers to "behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours" (World Health Organization 2011). A recent comprehensive world-wide survey on women's experience of intimate partner violence concluded that approximately 30 percent of women worldwide have experienced some form of violence from an intimate partner at some point in their life (World Health Organization 2013, 2). There was a substantial variation between countries, with rates as high as 65 percent. Another survey published this year on the scale of men's violence against women in six countries in Asia and the Pacific region found that approximately 43 percent of women had experienced physical and/or sexual IPV at least once in their lifetime. The highest reported rate was 67 percent (Fulu et al. 2013). These findings reaffirm an

earlier WHO review that found lifetime prevalence rates of women's experience of IPV of up to 69 percent (Krug et al. 2002). Although it is important to document the scale of different forms of IPV, such as psychological, physical, or sexual abuse, it has been widely established that physical violence is often accompanied by psychological and sexual abuse (Krug et al. 2002, 89).

A review of the relevant literature reveals that knowledge about the scale and context of IPV is not evenly distributed across the world. A large number of surveys and research studies have been conducted in the United States, and information regarding other Western countries has also grown steadily over the last decades. By contrast, systematic research about the scale and context of IPV in other parts of the world is far more limited, although it is clear that violence against women by their partners is widespread and often rooted in cultural traditions. IPV cannot be properly understood without considering the cultural context in which it takes place. Cultures differ in their power differentials between men and women, shared represen-

tations of masculinity and femininity, notions of male honor, and social constructions of violence. Bringing together analyses of IPV from a range of countries, including those not typically represented in the mainstream research literature, is therefore critical for advancing knowledge about IPV and promoting efforts aimed at preventing violence between intimate partners.

Although the WHO definition is neutral with regard to the sex of victims and perpetrators, IPV directed against women has generally been recognized as more prevalent and linked to more severe consequences in terms of physical harm. As noted in the 2002 WHO report, “although women can be violent in relationships with men, and violence is also sometimes found in same-sex partnerships, the overwhelming burden of partner violence is borne by women at the hands of men” (Krug et al. 2002, 89).

Reflecting the heightened vulnerability of women to IPV victimization, all of the studies presented in this focus section consider women as victims of IPV. Two also address men as victims and women as perpetrators.

2. The Present Focus Section

This Focus Section brings together papers from different parts of the world that address the problem of intimate partner violence from a range of perspectives. The six papers are truly international and interdisciplinary. They provide insights into IPV from nine different cultures – China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Northern Ireland, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States – from scholars in the fields of psychology, gender studies, political science, and economics. The first three papers look at how widespread the experience of IPV is among different groups of women, examine selected risk factors associated with heightened vulnerability to victimization, and discuss consequences of intimate partner victimization. Another two papers place the problem of IPV in the wider context of societal perceptions and attitudes about victims and perpetrators of IPV in different countries; whereas, the last paper examines the role of individual differences in the management of emotions in the escalation or de-escalation of relationship conflict.

The first paper, by Toplu-Demirtas, Hatipo lu-Sümer, and White, reports extremely high rates of physical, emotional,

and sexual dating violence among Turkish women college students. The authors use the investment model (Rusbult 1980) to explain how victimization affects women’s satisfaction with and commitment to their partners. They find that the relationship between physical and emotional dating violence victimization and commitment to the relationship is fully mediated by relationship satisfaction, whereas no such mediation effect is found for sexual victimization. The findings highlight the importance of considering the unique impact of different forms of partner violence on victims’ well-being and commitment to the relationship. Hoewer examines the problem of IPV in the context of changing gender roles brought about by armed conflict and the ensuing peace process. She conducted qualitative interviews with female activists in Northern Ireland and the Chiapas region in Mexico. Both men and women experienced multiple challenges renegotiating gender roles within intimate relationships after the conflict ended. Hoewer examines how changes at the macro level of political development affect interpersonal relationships at the micro level, as well as how the peace process in the two regions varied in terms of affording a broader re-construction of society that includes the empowerment of women.

Schröttle and Glammeier shift the focus from students and community activists to a particularly vulnerable and hard to reach group, namely women with disabilities. The authors present a detailed picture of the extent to which women with disabilities experience IPV, as well as the significance of these experiences in relation to childhood experiences of discrimination and violence. By placing their analysis into a broader conceptual framework of the social constructions of disability and gender, they highlight the social conditions that make women with disabilities particularly susceptible to the experience of IPV.

Nguyen, Morinaga, Frieze, Cheng, M. Li, Doi, Hirai, Joo, and C. Li examine similarities and differences in Chinese, Japanese, and American college students’ reactions to written depictions of men’s violence toward a female partner. They find that men tend to blame female victims more than women do, although the effects of participant gender are reduced when individual differences in tradi-

tional attitudes toward women are taken into account. They also find larger differences between Chinese and American male and female students' responses than between Japanese male and female students, highlighting the importance of simultaneously considering culture, gender, and individuals' violence-supportive attitudes.

Ahmed, Alden, and Hammarstedt, in a study from Sweden, also asked college students to respond to scenarios that depicted intimate partner violence. This study was unique in its inclusion of gay and lesbian as well as heterosexual couples. Overall, violence toward a woman by a man was viewed as most serious by Swedish students; however, when severe violence was depicted, differences as a function of gender constellations between victims and perpetrators diminished. Negative attitudes toward women, as well as toward gays and lesbians, affected students' perceptions, particularly when less severe violence was depicted.

The final paper, by Nocentini, Pastorelli, and Mersini, seeks to understand the dynamics that lead to the escalation of psychological and physical dating aggression, focusing on the role of self-efficacy in anger regulation. Data were collected from two independent samples of young adults in Italy. The authors demonstrate that the extent to which partners believe they can regulate their anger predicted how much aggression they showed toward their partner, and that the path from poor self-efficacy in anger regulation to dating aggression was mediated by the level of relationship conflict. Low self-efficacy in anger management was linked to higher relationship conflict which, in turn, made dating aggression more likely. This process is further illuminated in their second study with sixty couples, which examined the effects of one partner's self-efficacy beliefs on the other partner's psychological dating aggression. Their research contributes to a better understanding of the interactional dynamics by showing that poor self-efficacy in anger regulation may lead to the escalation of relationship conflict through its effect on the other partner's behavior.

3. Outlook

The urgent need to take action worldwide to stop violence in intimate relationships is undisputed and has prompted

coordinated international responses, such as the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SRVI; <http://www.svri.org/index.htm>). To achieve progress, evidence-based approaches are required that combine the systematic analysis of the scale and risk factors of IPV with the implementation of prevention measures found to be effective by state-of-the-art evaluation methods. One important step toward achieving this goal is to develop shared tools for measuring IPV victimization and perpetration so that it becomes easier to make comparisons across countries. In the terminology of cross-cultural research, such an approach reflects an "etic" perspective which assumes that IPV is a universal problem that can be measured by equivalent assessment tools in different countries (Berry et al. 2011; Krahé, Bieneck, and Möller 2005). It needs to be complemented by an "emic" perspective that seeks to uncover the culture-specific constructions and patterns of IPV (see Krahé, Bieneck, and Möller 2005; White et al. 2013). It is important to understand the specific cultural norms that play a role in the construction of IPV. Many countries have religious and ethnic traditions that support the idea that men have the right to control their female partners (and daughters) and use physical force to punish disobedience. Cultural norms about men's sexual entitlement are also widespread. Examining data from fifty-two countries, Archer (2006) found a significant inverse relationship between men's victimization of their female partner and a national-level index of women's empowerment, indicating that rates of women's victimization were higher the less power women had in society as a whole. Furthermore, he concluded that "the link between women's victimization and gender attitude measures, although based on only a few nations, also showed an association between traditional gender attitudes and women's victimization, which was especially marked for hostile sexist attitudes" (Archer 2006, 147). In the same vein, the survey by Fulu et al. (2013) in Asian and Pacific countries found that men who reported IPV perpetration were more likely to hold gender-inequitable attitudes and use controlling behavior toward their partner.

These findings highlight the interplay between the macro level of social and cultural norms condoning the use of violence, the micro level of family relations and con-

struction of couple relationships, and the individual level of attitudes and behaviors that precipitate IPV. Therefore, to achieve progress in reducing IPV, risk and protective factors that influence trajectories of violence need to be identified by examining these levels in combination (Abbey et al. 2012; Haegerich and Dahlberg 2011). Of the seven recommendations that Fulu et al. derive from their findings, three are of particular relevance in the context of the present Focus Section (2013, 6):

- “Change social norms related to the acceptability of violence and the subordination of women.”
- “Promote non-violent masculinities oriented toward equality and respect.”
- “Promote healthy sexuality for men and address male sexual entitlement.”

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The research brought together in this section contributes to the task of creating a knowledge base from which strategies for achieving these goals may be derived. We would like to thank all authors for contributing their important research to the Focus Section on *Intimate Partner Violence as a Global Problem* and for their patience, cooperation, and understanding throughout the editorial process.

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