

# A cross-cultural perspective on physical aggression between partners

John Archer

---

*Contrary to the widely accepted radical feminist view, in Western nations such as the UK, both sexes commit acts of physical aggression against their partners. This has implications for both how partner violence is viewed and studied, and for intervention programmes. Two cross-national analyses put these findings into a wider perspective. In Study 1, data from 16 nations showed that this pattern did not generalise to all nations. The magnitude and direction of the sex difference was highly inversely correlated with national-level variations in women's empowerment. As gender equality increased, the sex difference in partner violence was more in the direction of lesser female victimisation and greater male victimisation. Study 2 showed that three indices of women's victimisation were also inversely correlated with relative gender equality across nations. Sexist attitudes, and relative approval of wife beating, were also associated with women's victimisation rates. The implications of these findings for the study of violence against partners within the UK are discussed.*

**T**HE 1996 BRITISH CRIME SURVEY (BCS: Mirrlees-Black, 1999) used an inclusive method of data collection that revealed a higher overall number of victims of domestic violence than had previous surveys using face-to-face interviews. A relatively large proportion (4.1 per cent) of both men and women reported that they had been assaulted by their partner in the last year. Injury figures showed that around 35 per cent of all those injured were men. As the authors stated in their report, 'It is estimated that there were about 3.29 million incidents of domestic assault against women in 1996, 1.86 of which resulted in injury ... There were a similar number of domestic assaults against men (3.25 million), but a smaller proportion resulted in injury (1 million)' (Mirrlees-Black, 1999, p.22). Such extrapolations to overall figures have usually been accompanied by the comment that there is an epidemic of domestic violence against women, and a call for further measures to combat the problem. However, in this case, it would be difficult to make such a comment without also calling for similar measures against female perpetrators.

Such high figures for male victims may strike the reader as surprising, in view of a general assumption that women are the only or primary victims of violence against partners. Yet there is now growing recognition among academics in the US that both men and women can be victims of partner violence. Reports showing this have been available since the 1970s (Straus, 1977-8). A meta-analysis of over 80 existing studies (Archer, 2000) showed little difference between men's and women's perpetration rates. The proportion of all those injured by a partner who were men was very similar to the 35 per cent found in the 1996 BCS.

In the UK, few psychologists study violence or physical aggression between partners. It is an area that has largely been left to a few sociologists and criminologists who tend to begin their research with the assumption that only violence by men to women is worthy of study, and that this is wholly to be explained in terms of the influence of patriarchal structures and values. Foremost among these are Dobash and Dobash (1980, 1998), who regard women's victimisation by their male partners as being a direct manifestation of patriarchal values that are characteristic of all men. As indi-

cated later in this article, to invoke patriarchal values to explain patterns of variation of partner violence is not entirely misconceived, since different cultures vary greatly in the acceptance of such values and this has a strong influence on attitudes affecting the likelihood that a man will aggress physically to his wife or partner. But the view espoused by Dobash and Dobash, and like-minded North Americans (e.g. DeKeseredy, 1988; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998a, 1998b; Walker, 1989; White *et al.*, 2000), does not acknowledge such cultural variations, referring to general patriarchal values. It is also limited in other ways. By neglecting the evidence that men can be victims of partner physical aggression in Western countries, they are ignoring half the available evidence. They also ignore possible reasons why both men and women may harm their partners other than those connected with patriarchal values.

Felson (2002, 2006), has outlined a number of reasons why, from a criminological perspective, it is a major mistake to single out women victims in studying violence between partners. First, this selective viewpoint starts with the assumption that violence against women is special and different from violence against men. Considering that men are the more violence-prone sex generally, their violence towards women partners is much less than would be expected. As he put it, men are eight times more likely to commit violence than are women, yet they are no more likely than women are to hit their spouses (Felson, 2006). He attributes the discrepancy to the learned inhibition which operates against men hitting women in Western cultures. Felson's analysis illustrates how a forensic framework can lead to a very different perspective on partner violence than that derived from a feminist one. By including men as possible victims and examining perpetration rates in relation to violent crime generally, a totally different picture emerges. Similar conclusions have been reached by those adopting a clinical perspec-

tive to the treatment of perpetrators of partner violence (e.g. Dutton, 2006, 2007; Dutton & Nicholls, 2005).

These approaches open up the study of partner violence so that it is not assumed at the outset who is victim and who is perpetrator, and that it is already known what the motives are. Research from these perspectives is yielding findings that can inform practice in a far more effective way than is the case at present. Current practice is dictated by views derived from the radical feminist framework, in particular the Duluth model of power and control (Pence & Paymar, 1993). However, there are signs that this is changing. Hamel and Nicholls (2007) have recently published a comprehensive edited handbook, with contributions from leading academics and practitioners in the field who take a 'gender inclusive approach' (Hamel, 2005, 2007a), involving family interventions, rather than concentrating on the so-called re-education of male abusers. Chapters detailing the major shortcomings of the Duluth model (Dutton, 2007) and those outlining alternatives (e.g. Hamel, 2007b; Thomas, 2007; Ensign & Jones, 2007) are to be found in this book

Such recent developments provide the background to the remainder of this article, in which an analysis published elsewhere (Archer, 2006) is summarised, showing that there is a place for patriarchy in explaining differences in partner violence that are found across nations and cultures. However, this analysis produces some very different conclusions from the assumptions that are inherent in the radical feminist analysis, as indicated below.

### **Study 1: Sex differences in partner violence across nations**

Most of the studies in my meta-analysis (Archer, 2000) of 82 samples measuring partner violence by both men and women were from the US. The few studies using non-Western samples suggested that that these might show more physical aggression by men than by women, in contrast to the

pattern of near to equality found for Western nations including the UK. In order to investigate whether there was systematic variation in the sex difference in partner violence, associated with the degree of women's emancipation in different nations, a quantitative analysis was undertaken. To measure women's emancipation in a particular nation, the United Nations Gender Empowerment Index was used. This is an amalgam of: (1) the proportion of women in management, administrative, professional and technical posts; (2) women's share of earned income outside the home; and (3) their parliamentary representation (GEM: United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report, 1997, 2004).

There were 16 nations for which there was both data on sex differences in partner physical aggression available from community samples, and a GEM value. Effect sizes ( $d$  values) were calculated for the sex difference in partner aggression, using a plus sign to indicate a higher value for men than women, and a minus sign for the reverse. These values were then correlated with the GEM values, producing a value of  $r=-0.79$ . Thus, the lower a country's GEM, the more in the male direction is the sex difference in physical aggression. In a country such as New Zealand, with a high GEM value (0.72), the effect size was in the female direction ( $d=-0.25$ ). Values were in the male direction ( $d=0.31$ ) in Korea, whose GEM value was 0.30.

This analysis raises the question of whether it is higher women's victimisation, or lower male victimisation, or both, that characterises a low GEM society. It was not possible to answer this directly from the figures used in the first analysis, since the measures were not comparable from study to study. However, there was evidence from another source that could address this question. Levinson (1989) studied partner violence in 90 small-scale and peasant societies, using the Human Relations Area Files (HRAFs), an archive of anthropological evidence. In these societies, female work groups provide women with financial and

social support. Levinson found that participation in such groups was inversely related to wife-beating ( $\rho=-0.30$ ) and positively related to husband-beating ( $\rho=0.36$ ). These findings indicate that it is both a lower level of women's victimisation and a higher level of men's victimisation that occurs where women have attained more power outside the home.

## **Study 2: Cross-national analysis of women's victimisation**

There were relatively few nations where it was possible to calculate values for the sex differences in partner physical aggression from community samples. This is because of the feminist perspective that has been applied to most cross-cultural analyses of violence against partners (e.g. Heise *et al.*, 1994; Heise *et al.*, 1999; Russo, 2004). Nevertheless, figures for the prevalence of female victimisation are available for many different countries, and these were used in a second analysis. Values were available for the previous year, the current relationship, and the lifetime, although it has been argued that lifetime figures are the least reliable of these (Moffitt *et al.*, 2001). As expected from the previous analysis, across nations, women's victimisation decreased as GEM increased. Values for the previous year were  $r=-0.63$  ( $N=25$ ) and for the current relationship  $r=-0.63$  ( $N=15$ ); for lifetime rates, the value was lower ( $r=-0.48$ ) for a larger sample ( $N=40$ ).

These correlations were all with a national-level variable that is indicative of the extent to which women participate in important aspects of life outside the home. Psychologists tend to be more interested in attitudes and beliefs indicative of the relative equality of women, and there are several individual-level questionnaires that measure these. A theoretical framework that can link these different levels of analysis together is social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly *et al.*, 2000): individual level attitudes are viewed as mediating the relative positions of men and women in that particular culture. To investi-

gate the relation between variations in people's gender attitudes in different nations, and the prevalence rates of violence against women partners, two scales for which there was comparative data for different nations were used.

The first was the Sex Role Ideology Scale (SRIS: Kalin & Tilby, 1978). Across eight nations, women's lifetime victimisation rates showed a correlation of  $r=-0.80$  with women's attitudes, and  $r=-0.73$  with men's. Thus, women's victimisation is higher where there are more traditional gender attitudes. The second scale was the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI: Glick & Fiske, 1996), which is highly correlated with the GEM values across nations (Glick *et al.*, 2000, 2005). The ASI consists of two scales, Hostile Sexism (HS) and Benevolent Sexism (BS). HS was correlated with women's victimisation rates across nine nations ( $r=0.69$  for women and  $r=0.53$  for men); BS was less strongly correlated across the same nine nations ( $r=0.49$  for women and  $r=0.27$  for men). Both associations were stronger for women's than men's attitudes, suggesting that the degree to which women held traditional gender attitudes is important. This is consistent with the view that women play an important part in maintaining traditional gender arrangements (e.g. Baumeister & Twenge, 2002).

Within these general gender attitudes reside more specific beliefs, for example, whether it is acceptable for a man to strike his wife or partner. These vary enormously between high and low gender empowerment nations. For example, the approval rates for a man beating his wife if she refuses sex with him were 70 per cent in a representative sample of Egyptian women (El-Zanty *et al.*, 1995). Using a measure of approval of a man slapping his wife 'in some situations', derived from a study by Straus *et al.* (2003), and data using this measure from 16 nations on university students, the correlation with the lifetime prevalence rates was  $r=0.58$  across 11 nations, with a lower value of  $r=0.39$  over seven nations for the previous year.

These cross-national findings indicate that attitudes underlying societal-level gender roles, and more specific attitudes about violence towards women partners, are likely to provide the mediators through which national differences in gender roles operate to make the experiences of women in different societies very different. This view is consistent with social role theory. In contrast with the one-dimensional patriarchal view of women's victimisation, it can encompass gender attitudes that inhibit as well as facilitate men's violence to women; attitudes that discourage recognition of men's victimisation; and attitudes by women that facilitate women's victimisation. Women's gender attitudes correlated more closely with women's victimisation than men's did. This raises the issue of the extent to which women's traditional beliefs facilitate men's perpetration of physical aggression to their partners, for example, by lessening the sanctions against these. In low gender empowerment nations, which also tend to be collectivist (Archer, 2006; Fischer & Manstead, 2000), the concept of honour is an important one: both men and women may operate together to counter behaviour that goes against traditional gender roles.

### **Implications for issues in studying partner violence in UK**

There are several implications of these analyses for the study of partner violence in the UK and other Western nations. The studies indicate considerable cross-national variability in both men's and women's physical aggression to their partners, according to women's relative emancipation in those nations. The GEM for the UK is relatively high, although behind countries such as Sweden, New Zealand, and the US. Overall, the analysis suggests that interventions should be tailored to the situation in a particular nation or culture. Thus gender-inclusive programmes (see Section 1) would be appropriate for high GEM nations, whereas those concentrating on patriarchal attitudes might be more appropriate for low GEM nations.

Associated with this is the nature of the partner violence found in societies where women's empowerment is low. A distinction made in British and American studies of partner violence is between patriarchal (or intimate) terrorism and common couple violence (Johnson, 1995). The first of these corresponds to the typical stereotype of the male batterer, in that it is one-sided and with general control of the other's actions as the motive. However, evidence from large community samples indicates that this pattern may be more common among women than it is among men (Straus & Gelles, 1988). The second is regarded as typically mutual, lower intensity, physical aggression, unrelated to the motive of overall control. It is as common among men and women. It would seem from this distinction that, among cultures characterised by low gender empowerment, there would be more men conforming to the pattern of patriarchal terrorism, and fewer women showing this pattern. Fewer cases of common couple violence might also be expected. While there are no existing studies that can be used to test the first prediction, studies of both men's and women's partner violence in samples from New Guinea, a low GEM nation (Au, 1986; Ranck & Toft, 1986), indicate that there are high proportions of men who are victims, and even higher proportions of women. However, the acts involved are mostly infrequent, for example once a year for both sexes, so that this would correspond to common couple violence rather than patriarchal terrorism.

A further implication of the findings concerns cultural differences within a particular nation. The UK contains a number of communities originating from low GEM collectivist nations, such as India and Pakistan. The continued maintenance of traditional values that occurs in such cultures would lead to the prediction that there would be a different pattern of partner violence than that among the indigenous population, in the form of higher rates of female victimisation, and lower rates of male

victimisation. However, this is not supported by data from the 1996 BCS (Mirrlees-Black, 1999), analysed in my cross-cultural article (Archer, 2006). There was no difference in victimisation rates between women of Anglo-Saxon, Afro-Caribbean, Indian, and Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin. The pattern for male victimisation did support the prediction, with significantly lower values for men of Pakistani or Bangladeshi, and to a lesser extent Indian, origin, than among Anglo-Saxon men. It would be useful to investigate this issue using an instrument such as the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979; Straus *et al.*, 1996), which asks about specific acts used in conflict situations, rather than 'being assaulted'. The CTS produces higher prevalence rates than is the case for crime-based survey methods (Mihalic & Elliot, 1997; Moffitt *et al.*, 2001).

The impact of cultural variation on rates of partner violence by men and women is likely to stretch beyond minority ethnic communities with clear identities that are different from those of the traditional British population. Areas of the UK where more traditional values are upheld in the face of cultural homogenisation, such as the north of Scotland, may well show a reflection of such values in the rates of partner violence by men and women. Since there is no current research on such populations, this speculation remains untested. However, an analysis across 50 US states found that a state-level measure of gender equality was inversely related to women's victimisation rates for these states (Straus, 1994), albeit with a smaller correlation than that found between nations in the analysis described above.

In conclusion, the differences in partner violence that are found in different nations conform to a meaningful pattern, which can be understood in terms of the relative level of women's empowerment. This fits with social role analyses of social behaviour, rather than with the radical feminist approach to partner violence, which views patriarchy as being a single entity, rather

than as something that differs across cultures. This analysis provides a context in which partner violence in the UK can be conceptualised, and also a framework for studying cultural differences within a single nation.

## John Archer

### References

- Archer, J. (2000). Sex differences in aggression between heterosexual partners: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126, 651–680.
- Archer, J. (2006). Cross-cultural differences in physical aggression between partners: A social-structural analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10, 113–133.
- Au, R. (1986). Marriage and domestic violence in an urban context with rural comparisons. In *Domestic violence in urban Papua New Guinea* (Occasional Paper No. 19, pp.52–75). Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea: Law Reform Commission of Papua New Guinea.
- Baumeister, R.F. & Twenge, J.M. (2002). Cultural suppression of female sexuality. *Review of General Psychology*, 6, 166–203.
- Dobash, R.E. & Dobash, R.P. (1980). *Violence against wives: A case against the patriarchy*. London: Open Books.
- Dobash, R.E. & Dobash, R.P. (1998). *Rethinking violence against women*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DeKeserdy, W.S. (1988). *Woman abuse in dating relationships*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- DeKeserdy, W.S. & Schwartz, M.D. (1998a). *Woman abuse on campus: Results from the Canadian National Survey*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DeKeserdy, W.S. & Schwartz, M.D. (1998b). Male peer support and women abuse in postsecondary school courtship: suggestions for new directions in sociological research. In R.K. Bergen (Ed.), *Issues in intimate violence* (pp.83–95). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dutton, D.G. (2006). *Rethinking domestic violence* (2nd. ed.). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Dutton, D.G. (2007). Thinking outside the box: Gender and court-mandated therapy. In J. Hamel & T.L. Nicholls (Eds.), *Family interventions in domestic violence: A handbook of gender-inclusive theory and treatment* (pp.27–57). New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Dutton, D.G. & Nicholls, T.L. (2005). The gender paradigm in domestic violence research and theory: Part 1 – The conflict of theory and data. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 10, 680–714.
- Eagly, A. (1987). *Sex differences in social behaviour: A social role interpretation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Eagly, A.H, Wood, W. & Diekmann, A.B. (2000). Social role theory of sex differences and similarities: A current appraisal. In T. Eckes & H.M. Trautner (Eds.), *The developmental social psychology of gender* (pp.123–174). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- El-Zant, F., Hussein, E.M., Shawky, G.A., Way, A.A. & Kishor, S. (1995). *Egypt demographic and health survey 1995*. Cairo: National Population Council.
- Ensign, C. & Jones, P. (2006). Gender-inclusive work with victims and their children in a coed shelter. In J. Hamel & T.L. Nicholls (Eds.), *Family interventions in domestic violence: A handbook of gender-inclusive theory and treatment* (pp.562–578). New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Felson, R.B. (2002). *Violence and gender re-examined*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Felson, R.B. (2006). Is violence against women about women or about violence? *Contexts*, 5, 121–125.
- Fischer, A.H. & Manstead, A.S.R. (2000). The relation between gender and emotions in different cultures. In A.H. Fischer (Ed.), *Gender and emotion: Social psychological perspectives* (pp.71–94). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Glick, P. & Fiske, S.T. (1996). The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, 491–452.
- Glick, P., Fiske, S.T., Mladinic, A., Saiz, J., Abrams, D., Masser, B. et al. (2000). Beyond prejudice as simple antipathy: Hostile and benevolent sexism across cultures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79, 763–775.
- Glick, P., Lameiras, M., Fiske, S.T., Eckes, T., Masser, B., Volpato, C. et al. (2004). Bad but bold: Ambivalent attitudes toward men predict gender inequality in 16 nations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86, 713–728.
- Hamel, J. (2005). *Gender inclusive treatment of intimate partner abuse: A comprehensive approach*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

- Hamel, J. (2007a). Domestic violence: A gender-inclusive conception. In J. Hamel & T.L. Nicholls (Eds.), *Family interventions in domestic violence: A handbook of gender-inclusive theory and treatment* (pp.3–26). New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Hamel, J. (2007b). Gender-inclusive family interventions in domestic violence: An overview. In J. Hamel & T.L. Nicholls (Eds.), *Family interventions in domestic violence: A handbook of gender-inclusive theory and treatment* (pp.247–274). New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Hamel, J. & Nicholls, T.L. (Eds.) (2007). *Family interventions in domestic violence: A handbook of gender-inclusive theory and treatment*. New York: Springer Publishing Company
- Heise, L.L., Pitanguy, J. & Germain, A. (1994). *Violence against women: The hidden health burden*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Heise, L.L., Ellsberg, M. & Gottemoeller, M. (1999). *Ending violence against women* (Population Rep. Series L, No. 11). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health.
- Johnson, M.P. (1995). Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: Two forms of violence against women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 283–294.
- Kalin, R. & Tilby, P. (1978). Development and validation of a sex-role ideology scale. *Psychological Reports*, 42, 731–738.
- Levinson, D. (1989). *Family violence in cross-cultural perspective*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Mihalic, S.W. & Elliott, D. (1997). If violence is domestic, does it really count? *Journal of Family Violence*, 12, 293–311.
- Mirrlees-Black, C. (1999). *Domestic violence: Findings from a new British Crime survey self-completion questionnaire* (Home Office Research Study No. 191). London, UK: Home Office.
- Moffitt, T.E., Caspi, A., Rutter, M. & Silva, P.A. (2001). *Sex differences in anti-social behavior: Conduct disorder, delinquency, and violence in the Dunedin longitudinal study*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Pence, E. & Paymar, M. (1993). *Education groups for men who batter: The Duluth model*. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Ranck, S. & Toft, S. (1986). Domestic violence in an urban context with rural comparisons. In *Domestic violence in urban Papua New Guinea* (Occasional Paper No. 19, pp.3–51). Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea: Law Reform Commission of Papua New Guinea.
- Russo, N. (2004, August). *Violence against women: A global health issue*. Paper presented at the 28th International Congress of Psychology, Beijing.
- Straus, M.A. (1977-8). Wife-beating: How common and why? *Victimology*, 2, 443–458.
- Straus, M.A. (1979). Measuring intrafamily conflict and violence: The Conflict Tactics (CT) Scales. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 41, 75–88.
- Straus, M.A. (1994). State-to-state differences in social inequality and social bonds in relation to assaults on wives in the United States. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 25, 7–24.
- Straus, M.A. & Gelles, R.J. (1988). How violent are American families? Estimates from the National Family Violence Resurvey and other studies. In G.T. Hotaling, D. Finkelhor, J.T. Kirkpatrick & M.A. Straus (Eds.), *Family abuse and its consequences: New directions in research* (pp.14–36). Newbury Park: Sage.
- Straus, M.A., Hamby, S.L., Boney-McCoy, S. & Sugarman, D.B. (1996). The revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2): Development and preliminary psychometric data. *Journal of Family Issues*, 17, 283–316.
- Straus, M.A. & Members of the International Dating Violence Consortium (2003, June). *Prevalence and correlates of family violence worldwide: Estimates from the International Dating Violence Study*. Presented at the International Seminar on Family Violence, University of Montreal, Canada.
- Thomas, M. (2007). Treatment of family violence: A systematic perspective. In J. Hamel & T.L. Nicholls (Eds.), *Family interventions in domestic violence: A handbook of gender-inclusive theory and treatment* (pp.417–436). New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report (1997). New York: Oxford University Press.
- United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report (2004). New York: United Nations Development Programme.
- Walker, L.E.A. (1989). Psychology and violence against women. *American Psychologist*, 44, 659–702.
- White, J.W., Smith, P.H., Koss, M.P. & Figueredo, A.J. (2000). Intimate partner aggression – What have we learned? Comment on Archer (2000). *Psychological Bulletin*, 126, 690–696.